



The Royal Arms of France and its Ancillary Artifacts

Bernard Pothier

The polychrome relief shield bearing the Royal Arms of France and sculpted in Canadian pine in the mid-1720s remains the most striking and significant artifact in the Canadian War Museum's somewhat limited collections from the New France period. It was one of a large number of such shields of arms produced in Canada under the auspices of the crown, and erected over the entrances of the various installations at Québec, Trois-Rivières, and Montréal. Only one other version, virtually identical in size and design to the War Museum one, is extant, in the collection of the Musée du Québec. They are first mentioned in a dispatch from the colony's chief military engineer, Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry, in October 1725. Writing to Jean Frédéric Phélypeaux, Comte de Maurepas, the French minister of the Marine who also had responsibility for the colonies, de Léry said:

Ayant remarqué que les armes de Sa Majesté n'étaient en aucun endroit dans cette colonie, et qu'on avait oublié de les mettre au dessus des portes des bâtiments et forts de Sa Majesté, je les ay fait faire...par un sculpteur, et les ay fait placer au dessus des principales portes....¹

De Léry had thus concentrated for the moment on furnishing the principal entrances around the ancient capital, chiefly the entrances to the seats of royal authority: Château Saint-Louis where the Governor-General held court, and the Intendant's palace; and also over the entrances to the King's storehouses, barracks buildings, guard houses, prison, and council chambers in Québec. Then he provided similarly

Opposite: Royal Arms of France, Noël Levasseur, Québec City, mid-1720s.

(CWM AN 19940024-001 ; Photo for CWM by Bill Kent)



for the royal presence in Trois-Rivières and Montréal; and finally he graced the entrance gates of Quebec's fortified enclosure with the royal arms.

The beneficiary of Chaussegros de Léry's largesse in asserting the royal presence was Canada's most celebrated sculptor of the day, Noël Levasseur. Born in Québec in 1680, he was the son of an accomplished *menuisier*, also Canadian-born, and the grandson of the master-*menuisier*, Jean Levasseur dit Lavigne, who had immigrated to Canada from Paris in 1651. Little is known of the younger Levasseur's training, though he almost certainly learned the *menuisier's* craft from his father, who worked in the traditional style of the period of Louis XIV. This is the style which dominated Canadian sculpture throughout the eighteenth century. It is likely that the younger Levasseur acquired the rudiments of sculpture in wood at Quebec's famous arts and crafts school of Saint Joachim. Thereafter he lived and worked as a young married man for a time in Montréal, but settled definitively in Québec in 1703. He raised a family of 13 children and as a master sculptor secured numerous commissions for church decorative work from the *curés* and religious communities of the Québec region, as well as from private individuals.²

As was not unusual among New France's administrators, Chaussegros de Léry had gone ahead and commissioned the royal shields of arms on his own initiative. Because of distances, and the time required to have unforeseen expenditures approved by the metropolitan authorities, colonial officials on the spot habitually adopted a policy of undertaking the



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Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry (left), the chief military engineer of New France, was responsible for commissioning the royal arms that were mounted at the various entrances to the city of Quebec, such as the St. Louis Gate (above -photographed ca. early 1900s)

projects they felt were necessary, or even merely desirable, and securing the required authorizations and funding from their superiors after the fact. By way of justifying his royal shields of arms, de Léry pointed out two factors to Maurepas: firstly, he was only following the usages which applied to all of the posts in metropolitan France; and secondly, he claimed that in Canada not even the inhabitants, let alone the aboriginal natives, recognized the arms of their king.³

Very little, unfortunately, of both Noël Levasseur's religious and secular work remains extant today.⁴ Of the numerous shields of arms he executed for the engineer de Léry in the mid-1720s, only two, as we indicated, appear to have survived. Both are sculpted from eastern white pine (*pinus strobus*), and were set upon two of the walled city of Quebec's entrance gates, though we do not know which ones. There is only a slight difference of dimension: the Musée du Quebec's version measures 1.18 m x 0.95 m, while the Canadian War Museum's is 1.14 m x 0.94 m. Both are composed of three sections of wood joined vertically, and parallel to the grain, by means of four straight-grain tenons. A fourth section, the royal crown of France, is wedged in at the centre top of their respective shields.⁵ The

central oval of each shield bears the arms of France: on an azure field, three gold fleur-de-lis. These ovals are surrounded by the collar of the Order of Saint-Michel.⁶ Both oval and collar are enclosed in each shield within the larger collar of the Order of the Saint Esprit.⁷ Both versions of the shield of arms honour Louis XV; this is confirmed by the letter "L" set between four small royal crowns and four bursts of flames on each side of the collar of the Order of the Holy Ghost .

Both existing shields of arms would have gone the way of all of the others were it not for two of the victorious British commanders of September 1759. Vice Admiral Charles Saunders and Brigadier James Murray had them removed from their respective gates and brought back to Britain as mementoes of their North American adventures. Brigadier Murray presented his in due course to the corporation of the city of Hastings, in Sussex, where he served for many years as a *jurat*, or alderman. There it hung for a century and a half within the Hastings town hall.⁸ The Canadian heraldic authority and former curator of the work at the National Archives, Auguste Vachon, has suggested, perhaps only facetiously, that Murray may have seen his gesture in favour of his *Cinque-Ports*

home as a symbolic reversal of the historic events which had taken place nearby some seven centuries earlier in 1066.⁹

For his part, Admiral Saunders presented his shield to the Royal Naval College at Portsmouth where it was mounted as a trophy in a special room. There its significance in relation to the unprecedented success of British arms in America was enhanced by a striking sculpted panoply of arms. A cartouche in the centre bore the following inscription:

This trophy was taken down from the gates of Quebec when that place was conquered on the 18th of Sept., 1759 by the Perseverance and Conduct of VICE-ADMIRAL SAUNDERS and BRIGADIER-GENERAL WOLFE, seconded by the Bravery and Continued Ardour OF THE FLEET AND ARMY, under their respective Commands.¹⁰

There has been considerable speculation in this century as to the specific Quebec gates whence these two shields were taken. Only the Saint Jean and the Saint Louis gates are ever mentioned, but even within the War Museum

in our own time cataloguers and curators together continue to be anything but consistent in attributing their shield of arms to one gate or the other. In the absence of corroboration from the eighteenth century, therefore, it would seem pointless to address the matter of specificity at all, and preferable to limit ourselves to ascribing each shield merely to "one of the gates of Quebec."

The first attempt to repatriate the sculptures was initiated by Quebec's *Comité d'Histoire et d'Archéologie* in December 1906. Ernest Myrand, Registrar to the Provincial Secretary, brought the matter to the attention of the members:

À la capitulation de Québec -18 septembre 1759 - deux cartouches, portant l'écu de France sculpté en bois..., furent enlevés et transportés en Angleterre. Le premier fut offert par le Général Murray au conseil municipal de la cité d'Hastings dont il était jurat, et se trouve aujourd'hui dans la salle des délibérations de l'Hôtel de Ville. Le second est actuellement au Royal Naval College de Portsmouth.¹¹

It is thanks to the victors of the battles of 1759 that the Royal Arms of France have survived to this day. Brigadier James Murray (left) and Vice Admiral Charles Saunders (right) each took home an example of the Royal Arms as trophies.



Artist unknown, NAC C 2834



Oil on canvas by Richard Brompton (1734-1783); NAC C 121919

Monsieur Myrand then proposed a motion that the mayor of Québec officially communicate with his counterparts in both Hastings and Portsmouth with the suggestion that their respective shields be returned to Québec as a civic gesture on the occasion of that city's tercentennial in 1908. Although Myrand's motion was unanimously approved, the works were not acquired for the celebrations.

During the First World War another effort to repatriate the shields to Canada was more successful. The shield which Admiral Saunders had brought to the Royal Naval College, Portsmouth, complete with panoply of arms and backboard panel, was acquired by the Dominion Archives in Ottawa. This was thanks to the efforts of Colonel William Wood, a Québec City historian, who had been Vice-President of the Québec tercentennial celebrations and very likely involved in the earlier attempts at repatriation. Wood went overseas with Dominion Archivist Arthur George Doughty and Captain Gustave Lanctôt of the Archives on a Special Mission to carry out a War Archives survey.¹² Although the objective was to "ascertain the location, nature and extent of the records" rather than to collect anything, Wood, drawing on his friendship with Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, First Sea Lord of the Admiralty in 1917, arranged with the Canadian government and the Colonial Office on the one hand, and the British Admiralty on the other, to have the piece returned to Canada.

Jellicoe told Wood that he "had no idea that such a valuable and interesting trophy existed at the Navigation School," expressed his hopes that it would be possible to do as suggested, and promised to contact the Commander-in-Chief at Portsmouth, Admiral J.C. Colville.¹³ A week later, only twelve days after Wood's request, Jellicoe wrote that he had heard from Colville "who is in entire agreement with the proposal that the French scutcheon [sic] of the City of Quebec should be sent out to Canada. It is being packed ready to send to the ship in which you sail...I think that perhaps the best course would be for an official letter to be sent to you from the Admiralty asking that the trophy might be taken to Canada and presented to the Canadian War Museum."¹⁴ The following year Jellicoe wrote that he was glad to hear that the artifact had

"arrived safely at the War Museum at Ottawa and that it gives pleasure to those who see it."¹⁵

Colville also wrote to Wood, noting that "as a descendent of the Lord Colville who so greatly distinguished himself on the St. Lawrence in 1760, it gives me great pleasure to be Commander-in-Chief at Portsmouth and have the honour of ordering the escutcheon with the French arms...to be removed from the halls of the Navigation school in Portsmouth Dockyard where it has been hanging since 1761 and have it packed up so as to return it to the Canadian government; who so rightly should hold such a valuable and interesting historical relic." In the same letter Colville included copies of the original orders authorizing a Master Carver to create the panoply of arms and backboard panel. The cost was to be ten guineas (£10.10s).¹⁶

Colonel Wood also contributed to a more complex campaign leading to the return of the Hastings version of the sculpture to Canada in 1925. In 1919 he sought the help of the Governor General, the Duke of Devonshire while also appealing directly to the City Council of Hastings.¹⁷ The Town Clerk replied that the Council gave the suggestion "a good deal of consideration, but feel, as custodians of the Shield, that they would hardly be justified in taking any steps to comply with Mr. Wood's desire."¹⁸

In 1920 Ernest Myrand, who had become Quebec's legislative librarian, followed up on his efforts of 1906. The timing of his second attempt, two weeks after Wood's attempts had failed, suggests that Myrand had been recruited by the colonel, who had now returned to Québec City. Myrand courted the influence of Quebec's lieutenant-governor, Sir Charles Fitzpatrick, urging him to use his best offices to secure the support of Devonshire, and the imperial authorities in London, to help obtain the return of the Hastings shield. This time, however, the approach to the British authorities would be different: in 1906 the appeal was to both Hastings and Portsmouth on grounds of civic courtesy. This time, Myrand suggested, the appeal should take advantage of the circumstance of a Canadian military hospital having been operated near Hastings during the Great War:



*Panoply of Arms, Portsmouth, England, ca.1761
(CWM AN 19670139-001 ; Photo for CWM by Bill Kent)*

Vous pourriez demander la même faveur à titre de souvenir mutuel: in memoriam des dangers, des angoisses, des luttes, des bonnes et mauvaises fortunes également subies, ensemble partagées, par les troupes anglo-canadiennes [sic] au cours de l'effroyable catastrophe qui a menacé de détruire la civilisation même.¹⁹

Devonshire refused to reopen the case, which he considered closed by the City Council of Hastings. However, the Quebec group did not give up.²⁰ Canada's high commissioner in London, Peter Larkin and the MP for Hastings from 1900 to 1906, F. Freeman-Thomas, Lord Willingdon, who would become Canadian Governor-General in 1926, joined the cause. In 1925 George Courthope, MP for Hastings, informed Wood that despite the increasing number of requests the Town Council again refused to part with the sculpture, though "the decision was arrived at by one vote only, after prolonged and heated discussion." Some on the Council, according to Courthope, "expressed the view that if the Quebec government wanted the Escutcheon they should ask for it themselves."²¹ Having friends in high places does not always help.

The matter was at last favourably concluded and the Hastings shield presented to the City of Québec in an official ceremony in 1925.²² Although still formally in possession of the City of Québec, the Hastings shield was placed in the custody of the Musée provincial du Québec for purposes of assuring its proper conservation, and is presently on display in the "memories" exhibit at Quebec's Musée de la civilisation.²³

In the years immediately following the war the Dominion Archives concerned itself with organizing its enormous collection of war trophies. During this process the "Portsmouth" shield was separated from the ornate panoply of arms and the backboard upon which it had hung at the Royal Naval College as a trophy of the British victory of 1759. It was eventually placed on exhibit on its own in the Archives' new museum wing which opened in 1925. Authorities at the Archives reasoned that the shield would be presented most appropriately as a relic salvaged from one of the gates of the principal town of New France, and not in its later role as a trophy commemorating the victory of British arms in 1759. Thus once back in Canada, the

backboard with panoply attached became largely redundant to this vocation, and was duly transferred to the large collection of war trophies which had been gathered in Europe during the Great War for housing in a future military museum. It was only in 1939 that the cataloguing of this enormous collection was completed by an organism specifically set up for the purpose, the War Trophies Disposal Board (WTDB). There the Portsmouth Naval College accretions were catalogued together as item 60 of Section 12. The WTDB inventory card described the objects as a "trophy of shield, [with] coat of arms removed from upper portion; below a decoration of muskets, cannon, swords, bannerets, etc..." Subsequently the panoply was removed from the backboard panel and both pieces remain separately catalogued items of the Canadian War Museum collections.²⁴

The French royal shield of arms, meanwhile, remained as a central piece in the Dominion Archives Canadian History museum until 1967 when the institution, by then officially the Public Archives of Canada, moved to its new premises at 395 Wellington Street, Ottawa. At this time also the first National Museums Act was passed, and this gave the Archives the opportunity to withdraw from museum related activities entirely. While the Archives' collection of three dimensional objects devolved to the National Museum of Man (now Canadian Museum of Civilization), the shield of arms was retained in the Archives' Canadian documentary art collection.

This writer's first major assignment after joining the Canadian War Museum as a staff historian in 1971 was the working up of a definitive storyline for the permanent New France gallery on the first floor of the Museum at 330 Sussex Drive, the former Public Archives building. It was in this connection that the idea of securing a reasonably long-term loan of the royal shield of arms of France from the Public Archives germinated. Although the piece was kept locked away in storage at the Archives, the authorities there were reluctant to lend it because it was much deteriorated and in need of conservation at considerable expense. The War Museum persisted, however, and late in 1973, a mutually satisfactory arrangement was finally reached between the War Museum's Chief

Curator, Lee F. Murray, and the Dominion Archivist, Dr. W.I. Smith. The Public Archives consented to a long term loan of the piece in exchange for the War Museum underwriting its conservation in a mutually agreeable manner.²⁵

L.F. Murray then opened discussions with the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI). Preliminary examinations by its conservators confirmed that the piece was fragile and much in need of conservation, with, notably, its surfaces several times overpainted in the two centuries since it left Noël Levasseur's studio in the mid-1720s. Although interested in such a challenging project, the CCI, for want of available specialized personnel, was not initially in a position to accept the War Museum's proposal. Finally, in July 1975, the Institute's director, Dr. Nathan Stolov, indicated the availability of expert staff to undertake the project. Stolov offered, furthermore, to have the Institute perform the restoration work free of charge, provided the War Museum delay its own exhibition plans and allow the CCI to retain the piece for an exhibition of its own work.²⁶ Even at a time when government administrators were permitted considerably more largesse, and easier cooperation between agencies in the cultural sector prevailed, this was felt at the Museum of Man to be an extraordinarily well managed achievement on the part of War Museum staff.

Thus in the summer of 1975, overall direction of the conservation of Noël Levasseur's eighteenth century polychrome shield of arms was assigned to Peter Vogel, chief of the Canadian Conservation Institute's fine arts and polychromes division. The actual work of conservation was assumed by the conservator Nimet Demirdache, assisted notably by student conservator Wendy Baker, and by such CCI services as wood identification, the preparation of cross-sections of the artifact, and x-ray fluorescence analyses. The shield was initially subjected to various tests which revealed the extent of deterioration of the piece: the overall condition of the wood was poor, having cracked, warped and severely shrunk over its more than two centuries of history. The three sections no longer fitted flush with one another. There was considerable rot and signs of damage by worms, and several carved details were missing as well. Most delicate and time consuming for the CCI

was the daunting task of removing the several layers of overpainting - variously from nine to 24 - and revealing the shield's original paint layer. Besides the paint, these accretions included priming, glue, and layers of dirt and varnish. All of these layers were painstakingly removed with scalpels and dental tools, scrapers, spatulas and gouges. Nimet Demirdache's thoroughgoing report of the conservation indicates that it took three conservators ten weeks using some 800 to 1000 blades to remove the original paint layers from the shield.²⁷

Thereafter the wood was stabilized. Joining surfaces of the dismantled shield were cleaned, scraped and sanded down evenly; warping was corrected by means of wedges; missing details were remodelled and replaced with seasoned white pine compatible with the original. Once reassembled, cracks in the wood were filled, areas of complete paint loss beneath the overpaint were carefully inpainted to match the original paint scheme. The degree of accuracy achieved in the treatment of this exceptional artifact was phenomenal. Ms. Demirdache herself acknowledged that the job would have been impossible without the integration of scientific analysis, historical documentation, and recourse to the rules of heraldic symbolism. On this last, for instance, the analysis of the shells of the necklace of the Order of *Saint Michel* revealed a complete loss of the original paint, and all of the overpainted layers showing gold leaf. Heraldic research ascertained, however, that this detail called for silver. Microscopic examination later confirmed that these shells were indeed originally painted silver, thus justifying their being redone by the CCI with silver leaf.²⁸

This extraordinary conservation was completed at Canadian Conservation Institute in the summer of 1977, 27 months after the job was begun. As this writer expressed it at the time on behalf of Lee Murray, "In a sense the conservation work accomplished amounts to the retrieval of a lost artifact."

The French royal shield of arms was taken into the Canadian War Museum on an indefinite loan basis on 21 June 1978.²⁹ It was placed on exhibit almost immediately, and it became the focal artifact in the museum's New France gallery

and a striking introductory piece to its permanent gallery.

Notes

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1. Chaussegros de Léry to Maurepas, Québec, 29 October 1725, Archives nationales (France), Colonies, Series C^UA, vol.47, fol. 456.
2. *Dictionary of Canadian Biography [DCB]* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), vol.2, article "Levasseur, Noel". After Noel and for the rest of the 18th century, the Levasseur traditions in Canadian sculpture were continued by his sons François-Noël and Jean-Baptiste-Antoine, and his nephew Pierre-Noël. See also John R. Porter and Jean Bélisle, *La sculpture ancienne au Québec: Trois siècles d'art religieux et profane*, (Montréal: Les éditions de l'Homme, 1986), pp.91, 139-142.
3. C'A, fol. 456v-457.
4. In his sketch of the artist in *DCB*, Jean Trudel comes up with only three extant examples of Levasseur's religious sculpture: the central altar of the chapel of the Hôpital-général de Québec (1722), that of the church of L'Islet (1728), and, a major work of French Canadian sculpture, the retable of the altar in the Ursulines chapel in Québec (1732-1736).
5. Nimet Demirdache-Riad, "Conservation of an Eighteenth Century Polychrome Relief: A Royal Coat of Arms of France," *CCI: The Journal of the Canadian Conservation Institute*, (National Museums of Canada), vol.4, No. 1, 1979-1980, pp.3-8.
6. This order was created in 1469 by Louis XI.
7. This order was created in 1578 by Henry III. The combination of the two orders became traditional under Louis XIV (1638-1715). See Heather Child, *Heraldic Design*, (London: G. Bell, 1965).
8. Near-contemporary references to the "Hastings" shield appeared in *Gentlemen's Magazine* in 1786, and again in 1792, and prior to the latter reference, an illustration of the piece, apparently, appeared in the same periodical.
9. A. Vachon, "The Shields from Quebec," unpublished typescript, 1983, p.2.
10. The original inscription is somewhat faded but still perfectly legible (CWM artifact, AN19670139-001).
11. National Archives of Canada [NAC], Record Group [RG] 7, G21, vol.664m, file 43396, E. Myrand to Sir C Fitzpatrick, 5 March 1920. Myrand quotes from the Minutes of the meeting in 1906.
12. NAC Manuscript Group [MG] 30 C60, vol. 1. References to the Order in Council of 10 April 1917 defining Mission, and copy of Treasury Board recommendation, 28 April 1917.
13. NAC MG 30 C60 vol. 1. Jellicoe to Wood, 8 October 1917.
14. *Ibid.*, 16 October 1917. On 19 December 1917 Jellicoe told Wood that the Colonial Office would prefer a more official ceremony.

15. *Ibid.*, Jellicoe to Wood, 11 September 1918.
16. *Ibid.*, Colville to Wood, 26 October 1917. The copies of the letters requesting and confirming authorization for the creation of the panoply and backboard were sent by Richard Hughes of the Portsmouth Dockyard to the Commissioners of the Navy, 24 April and 3 May 1761.
17. *Ibid.*, Devonshire to Wood, 2 November 1919. Devonshire agreed to help, adding that if the effort is successful "their ultimate destination is a matter of consideration but I am inclined to think that the City of Quebec should be their home."
18. NAC RG 7 G21, vol.664, file 43396, R. Idle (Town Clerk, Hastings) to Lady Brassey (sister of Richard Nevill, who worked with the Governor General, she had been designated to make the request for Devonshire because she lived in the area), 24 February 1920. See also NAC MG 30 C60 vol.1, Nevill to Devonshire, 21 April 1920.
19. NAC RG 7 G21, vol.664, file 43396, Myrand to Fitzpatrick, 5 *March* 1920.
20. *Ibid.*, Fitzpatrick to Devonshire, 19 April 1920. Also *ibid.*, Devonshire secretary to Fitzpatrick, 20 May 1920, and *ibid.*, W. Turgeon (of the legislative council of Québec) to A. Sladen (Devonshire secretary), 8 February 1921, and reply.
21. NAC MG 30 C60, vol.1. George Courthope to Beckett (to be forwarded to Wood), 1 February 1925.
22. *Ibid.*, G. Cruikshank to Wood, 9 March 1925. J. Samson, Mayor of Québec, Invited Wood to speak at the ceremony: *Ibid.*, 8 August 1925. See also Vachon, pp.2-3. Wood, in his book *Unique Quebec*, p.267, wrote that the free gift from Hastings to Québec had been secured by Courthope and Lord Willingdon. *Le Droit*, 5 May 1925, published a front page photo of the shield announcing its return.
23. Accession number DLT 53.218.
24. Accessioned as AN 19670139-001 and -002, with reference to the WTDB inventory of 1939 as Sec. 12, inv. no.60 as a previous number.
25. CWM artifact file AN 19940024-001, L.F. Murray to Dr. W.I. Smith, 3 December 1973.
26. *Ibid.*, Dr. N. Stolov to *Id.*, 9 July 1975.
27. N. Demirdache and W. Baker, "Studio examination and treatment record," Canadian Conservation Institute, manuscript, 15 August 1977.
28. Nimet Demirdache-Riad, "Conservation of an Eighteenth Century..."
29. In 1994 the shield was permanently transferred to the *Canadian War Museum collection as AN 19940024-001.*

Bernard Pothier was an historical curator at the Canadian War Museum from 1971 to 1995. Throughout much of this time he enjoyed an intimate and sustained involvement with the fortunes of the Quebec shield of arms.