

LOUISBOURG

The Twists of Time

By A.J.B. Johnston

TODAY IT IS CANADA'S most ambitious historic park, and a major tourist attraction on the east coast. Its images — from a fog-enshrouded fleur-de-lis to distinctive streetscapes to a wide range of costumed animators — are ingrained in the Canadian consciousness. It is the fortress of Louisbourg, a federal government make-work project of the 1960s that has turned out to be an unqualified success, with heritage specialists and the general public alike.

The future of the fortress of Louisbourg, as an outdoor museum, would seem to be assured. Yet, if the history of Louisbourg itself is any guide, the future of the phoenix fortress is far from certain. Twenty-nine decades have passed since Louisbourg was founded by the French in 1713; over that period the site has played many roles: 32 years as a French fishing base and military stronghold, four years as an English garrison town, another nine as a French naval and military centre, nine more as an English garrison town, 127 years as an all but forgotten community of scattered houses and eighteenth-century ruins, and finally 89 years as a historic site. Since 1895 Louisbourg and the events associated with it have been commemorated in five different manners, with the reconstruction of the last twenty years being but the latest. As surely as clothing and hair-styles go in and out of fashion, so too do approaches to heritage commemoration. Where the past two decades have witnessed a Canada-wide growth in the number of outdoor museums (pioneer villages, working farms, saw mills), by the twenty-first century such places may no longer be major attractions. What they might be replaced with is anybody's guess. Nothing illustrates the changeability of attitudes toward the past more than the story of what happened on the site of the fortress of Louisbourg between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, as the

fortress moved from abandoned ruin to faithful reconstruction.

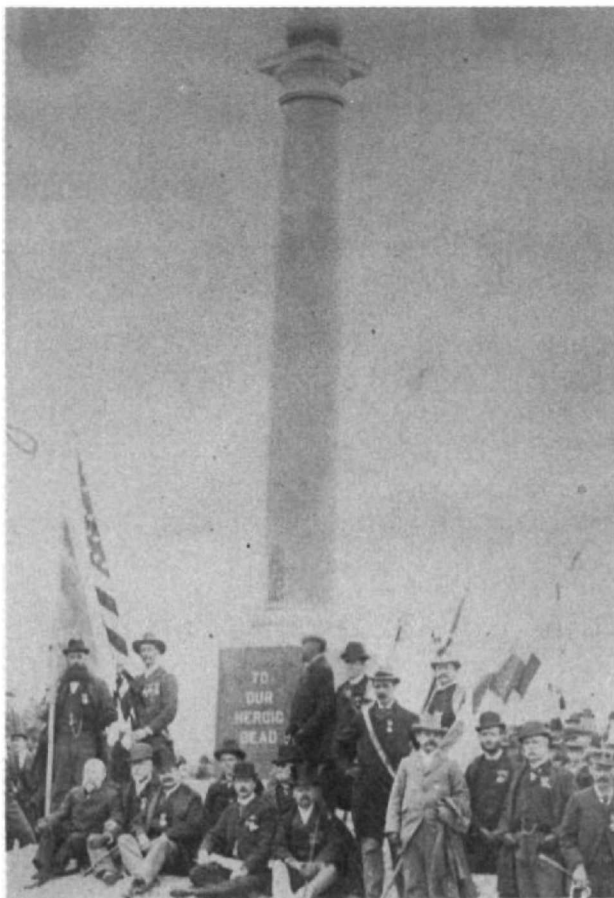
Louisbourg's life span as an economic and military bastion of New France measured little more than four decades. Yet within that brief life span its fortifications grew to rank among the most impressive in North America and its harbour among the busiest. Founded at the end of the reign of Louis XIV, Louis XV spent vast sums of royal money to build and defend the place: four million *livres* to fortify it; 16 million *livres* in other expenses. But the expenditures were an investment, not just in a strategic stronghold but also in a vital economic asset. The colony's cod fishery returned between two and three million *livres* a year and its commerce generated even more wealth. So important was Cape Breton to the French that Voltaire called it 'the key' to France's overseas possessions. The Minister of Marine, the Comte de Pontchartrain, agreed wholeheartedly: 'The Loss of this Island by France would be irreparable; as a necessary consequence, the rest of North America would have to be abandoned.'

Louisbourg's economic growth and strategic potential did not go unwatched. New Englanders, acutely aware of the havoc French warships and privateers could wreak among their trading and fishing vessels, were the first to organize a campaign against the fortress. In 1745, 4,000 provincial soldiers, accompanied by a fleet of over 100 colonial and Royal Navy vessels, laid siege to Louisbourg. Some Americans, knowing nothing of fortress warfare, were surprised the place was not quickly taken. Benjamin Franklin, wiser than most, wrote one besieger that he would be 'glad to hear that news three months hence. Fortified towns are hard nuts to crack; and your teeth have not been accustomed to it.' In fact, it took seven weeks to force a capitulation. When it finally came the victorious New Englanders were exultant. Declared one: 'It is the severest blow that could have been given to the enemy, and in the very tenderest part.'

Soon after Louisbourg fell all but a handful of the town's inhabitants, civilians and soldiers alike, were

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Photographs are from the Parks Canada Fortress of Louisbourg collection.



The first 'permanent' memorial at Louisbourg commemorates the siege of 1745, when the French inhabitants at Louisbourg surrendered to New Englanders. The 26-foot column was raised by an American organization, The Society of Colonial Wars.

deported to France. The French fortress became an English garrison town. That occupation lasted until 1749 when the French returned to Louisbourg, by virtue of a treaty signed the year before between Great Britain and France. For eight years the French repaired and rebuilt the damaged sections of Louisbourg, and made plans to improve its defences. Before any significant improvements were carried out, however, the town came under attack for a second time. In the early summer of 1758, 13,000 British regulars, supported by a blockading fleet of over 30 warships and many other vessels, besieged the fortress. Once again Louisbourg was compelled to capitulate; once again the inhabitants were deported and it became an English garrison town.

In 1760, 117 Royal Miners carried out William Pitt's order to destroy the Louisbourg fortifications. Their work began in June and lasted until November as they slowly but steadily moved around the fortress, blowing up the walls the French had laboured for decades to construct. Houses and other buildings were spared, but the bomb-damaged town was in a decline from which it could not escape. In 1768 the British garrison withdrew, with the result that more than half of the 500 civilians who lived there in 1767 departed at the same time. In the words of the Governor of Nova Scotia, Lord William Campbell, Louisbourg had become a

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something has changed.
Visitor totals are down.
Will Louisbourg be left
behind once more in the
current rush to embrace
the future?*

'decayed city . . . going to ruin'.

Some months before the British left Louisbourg a small group of officers and enlisted men decided that the great events that had occurred there, notably in 1758, deserved to be commemorated in some fashion. The leader of this group seems to have been Captain Samuel Holland, a Dutch-born military officer, surveyor and avid astronomer who erected an observatory at Louisbourg in the 1760s. Holland was a veteran soldier, having been at Louisbourg in 1758 as 'General Wolfe's Engineer' and at Quebec in 1759 where he was beside Wolfe when the latter died on the Plains of Abraham. Thinking it important to keep in memory important events from the past, Holland and a few others serving at Louisbourg resolved to raise a monument there, on the ruins of the Citadel, or King's Bastion area. The memorial was likely put up in 1767, which makes it among the first commemorative efforts undertaken in what is now Canada.

The only evidence for the 1767 Louisbourg monument comes from a letter Holland wrote in early 1768. There he described it as consisting of 'Hewn Stones of the Ruinous Fortifications' piled together. That made it undeniably crude, but an inscription was added and some of the larger stones were polished. Holland stated that he wished something more sophisticated could have been erected, but a lack of funds and workmen prevented it. As a result, it was executed in what he called 'the Rustick taste'.

Samuel Holland maintained that the Louisbourg monument, done in the style that it was, would be able to withstand 'the Injuries of Time'. That proved to be a naive affirmation. Not one of the many nineteenth-century descriptions of the ruins of Louisbourg mentioned it. Observers described the 'heaps of stone' they saw lying all about, but Holland's 'Rustick' memorial was apparently nowhere to be seen.

In the aftermath of the British departure in 1768 Louisbourg quickly faded from the world scene. Where for half a century it had figured in the calculations of international strategists, it suddenly became a small and all but forgotten fishing community. Most of those who stayed behind when the soldiers left, moved to

properties across and around the harbour, though some did remain where the original French town had been. By the turn of the nineteenth century that area presented a desolate picture, with its scattered houses, grazing animals and jumbled ruins. In 1805 the Reverend John Inglis, later Anglican Bishop of Nova Scotia, wrote:

A more complete destruction of buildings can scarcely be imagined. All are reduced to confused heaps of stone after all the wood, all that was combustible was either burnt or carried away. . . . The great size of the heaps of stone indicated the magnitude of the edifices . . . [I saw] the ruins of several barracks and hospitals, of the Intendant's and the admiral's house and various other public buildings . . . [The current residents] are exceedingly poor. In the town and vicinity [sic] there are fourteen families . . .

The situation changed little in the course of the nineteenth-century, though people's perspectives on the historic site did seem to alter. No longer were visitors (there were never very many) content simply to describe what the place looked like. In full romantic style, tourists from the 1830s onward found Louisbourg to be a place of 'melancholy desolation', 'intense loneliness' and 'grassy solitude'. It emerged as an ideal spot for romantic exhilaration and philosophical ruminations on the passage of time and the meaning of life. There were no calls to protect or clean up the area, but given the romanticism of the era that is not surprising. It was precisely the juxtaposition of old ruins with fences, fish flakes, houses and sheep, the contrast of a glorious past with a humble present, that captivated the nineteenth-century visitors.

What is a little surprising is that there were practically no calls for some form of commemoration at the Louisbourg site. Throughout the nineteenth-century monuments, memorials and statues enjoyed a great vogue in both Europe and North America. A column to Nelson, put up in Montreal in 1809, and Brock's Monument, erected on Queenston Heights in 1824, were among the earliest examples of the trend in British North America. By the end of the century dozens more had been raised across the country, dedicated to keeping in memory various battles, explorers and early heroes. Louisbourg, however, despite its acknowledged importance on a flash point of Anglo-French rivalry, was overlooked. The area attracted no one with either the money or, with one exception, the inclination to push for some type of commemoration. The solitary exception was J.S. McLennan, a Montreal-born industrialist involved in the late nineteenth-century development of Cape Breton coal mines. In the entry on Cape Breton published in *Picturesque Canada* (1882), written by McLennan and the Reverend Rob-



Captain D. J. Kennelly (1831-1907), the first person who sought to preserve historic Louisbourg.

ert Murray, the industrialist (and later historian) asked: 'Should not some memorial be raised which would show that Canadians . . . are still mindful of the great deeds done on Canadian soil? There could be no fitter site than . . . Louisbourg, where French and English dust commingles in peace.' More of an observation than a request, the call for a 'memorial' remained unanswered for over a decade.

When Louisbourg finally received a 'permanent' monument, it was because of the initiative taken by an American organization, The Society of Colonial Wars. The overall aim of the society, founded in 1892, was to perpetuate the memory of events from pre-revolutionary American history; it chose Louisbourg for one of its first memorials because of the New Englanders' successful siege there in 1745. The monument was a 26-foot column, inscribed with 'To Our Heroic Dead', and the date of the unveiling was the 150th anniversary of the French surrender.

In the months leading up to the unveiling, word of the proposed commemoration reached unsympathetic ears in Canada. Four Maritime papers (three French-language and one English Catholic) protested the very idea of a group from a foreign country raising a monument on Canadian soil to what had been a defeat for French Canadians. They described the project as an 'aggressive demonstration' by Americans that would be felt as an 'insult' by all French Canadians. The United



Arches of the casemates of the King's Bastion, as painted by an unknown artist in the late nineteenth century.

Empire Loyalists Association of Canada, meeting in Montreal, objected to the American scheme for basically the same reason. New Brunswick Senator Pascal Poirier raised the issue in the Red Chamber, asking the federal government to prevent the ceremony. Prime Minister Sir Mackenzie Bowell, however, was unmoved by the various protests. In his opinion it was not an issue for the government of Canada; it was simply a private society erecting its own monument on private land.

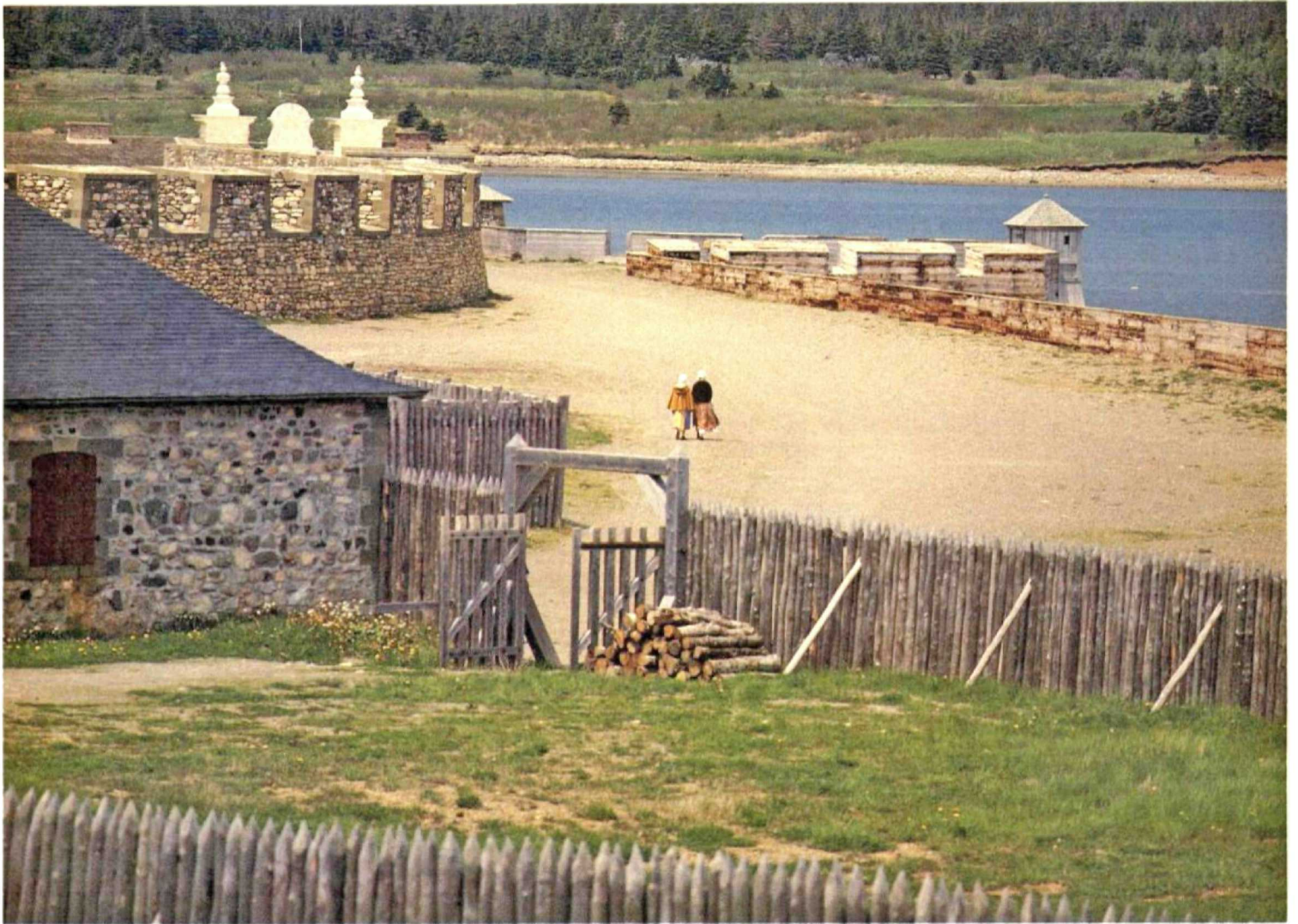
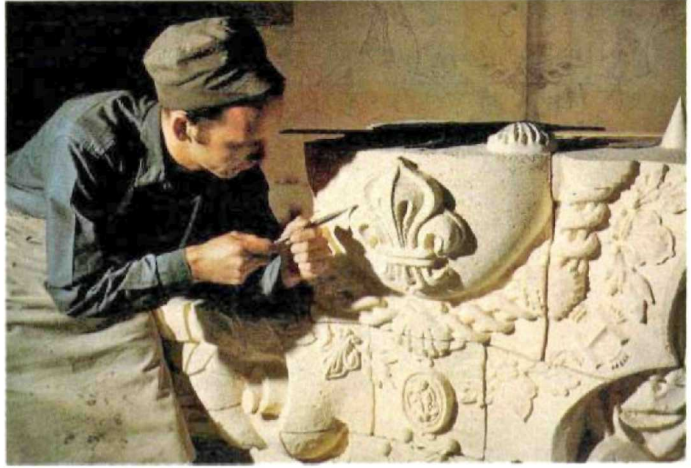
Despite the prime minister's declaration, when the Colonial Wars monument was unveiled it was with considerable government participation. Not only were there two warships in the harbour for the occasion, but the memorial itself was unveiled by Lieutenant-Governor Daly of Nova Scotia on behalf of the Governor-General, the Earl of Aberdeen. Aberdeen sent his regrets that he could not be there in person, and so did United States President Grover Cleveland. Twenty-five hundred people attended the festivities, listening to two hours of speeches by various Canadian and American dignitaries. The protests that had surfaced earlier that spring were not without effect — most speakers made deliberate reference to the achievements and valour of France and French Canadians. Nonetheless, the main theme of the day was the unity and greatness of the Anglo-Saxon race. The Anglophile sentiment was put most clearly by the

speaker who declared that it was not 'the humiliation of France we celebrate . . . [but] it was a happy day for Canada . . . that the fleur-de-lys fell from the fortresses of Louisbourg and Quebec'.

With Louisbourg commemorated — at least the siege of 1745 — the next step was to preserve the surviving ruins. The first to advocate such preservation was Captain D.J. Kennelly, one of the industrialists who was reshaping the face of Cape Breton at the turn of the twentieth century. Kennelly was an Irishman who had been trained as a lawyer in England and then moved to India where he served in the Royal Indian Navy. He came to Cape Breton from England during the 1870s as a representative of a group of London capitalists who held the fanciful idea that Louisbourg, not New York, might become the North American terminus of trans-Atlantic passenger travel. When that project died Kennelly decided to stay in the area, becoming involved in local coal, iron and railway development.

Industrialist though he was, Captain Kennelly was fascinated with ruins and relics, and it was this side of his personality that brought him to Louisbourg. Late in the nineteenth century Kennelly acquired the land upon which stood the most prominent ruins of the original eighteenth-century town, the arches of the casemates of the King's Bastion. Believing that it was a 'sacred duty' of the twentieth century to preserve





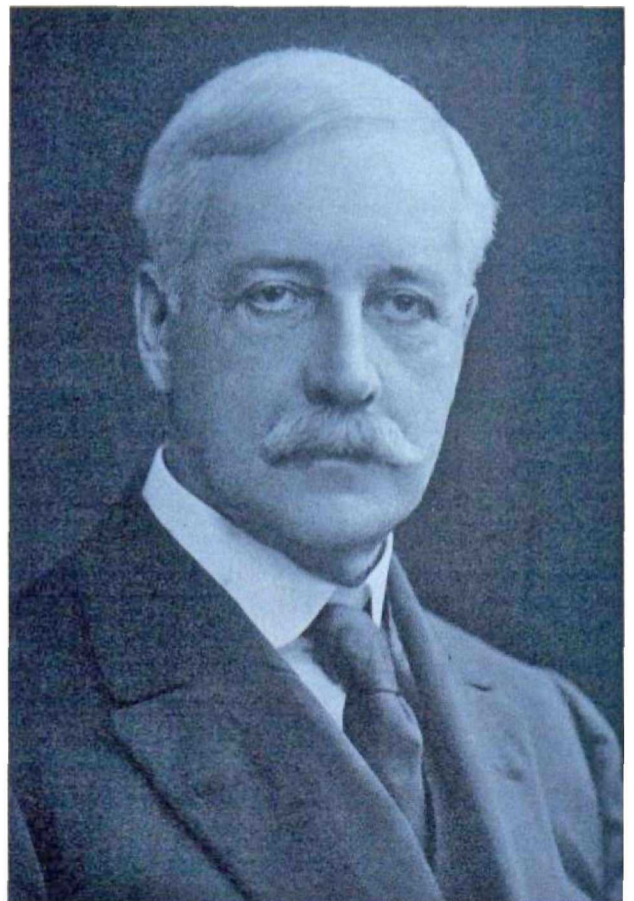
Reconstructed Louisbourg comes alive each summer with about a hundred people in costume — from bakers to boys with fishing rods, soldiers to fishermen.



The re-creation of Louisbourg was an enormous undertaking, demanding two decades of in-depth research and painstaking reconstruction.

the 'remnants' of the past, he began an international campaign entitled the Louisbourg Memorial Fund. He called for the stabilization of its ruins, the fencing and improvement of nearby burial grounds, and the erection of a large masonry tower which would house a museum as well as marble panels listing the names of those who had fought in its sieges. In front of the tower he planned to erect a bronze equestrian statue of Edward VII. Beneath the tower Kennelly envisioned 'underground Mortuary Chambers to contain the relics of the dead found on the site . . . and for the remains of Canadian heroes of the future.'

Kennelly convinced a remarkable number of prominent people to support his scheme. The patron was Edward VII (which would seem to explain the statue); vice-patrons, of which there were more than 40, included Sir Charles Tupper, Robert Borden, the governors of five states of the United States, six Canadian lieutenant-governors, 14 British peers, the president of Harvard University, and numerous other prominent figures in the three countries. President Theodore Roosevelt did not join the organization, but did send his 'cordial good wishes' for success. Kennelly, for all his work, contented himself with the title of honorary secretary. In April 1906 he took his campaign to the Nova Scotia legislature, where he secured the passage of 'An Act to incorporate the Trustees of the French Fortress and Old Burying-Ground at Louisbourg as an His-



Senator J.S. McLennan (1853-1939), a pioneer in Louisbourg research and historic site development.

torical Monument of the Dominion of Canada and as a Public Work'. That a provincial government had the constitutional right to declare any site to be of *national* historic significance was doubtful. Nevertheless, it was done and Kennelly boasted that it was the first time in Canadian history that a historical monument had been 'legalized'.

Captain Kennelly's preservation efforts began in 1903 when he had layers of earth and stone removed from the ruins of the casemates and replaced by cement. The project continued over the next three summers, with Kennelly personally supervising all aspects of the work. His efforts were later judged to have been 'somewhat amateurish', as he did not provide sufficient drainage or waterproofing. At the time the sheer fact that *something* was being done was an encouraging sign.

D.J. Kennelly died in August 1907, aged 76, and the first attempt to preserve what was left of eighteenth-century Louisbourg died with him. The fund raising stopped and the work on the ruins came to an end. Although the former naval captain bequeathed his fortress properties and \$88,000 worth of bonds in the Cape Breton Coal, Iron and Railway Company to others to carry on the work, the bequest was impressive only on paper. The bonds were without market value and the land gift served only to delay and complicate subsequent development. The properties containing the ruins would remain tied up in Kennelly's estate until 1924. Despite D.J. Kennelly's obvious achievements, a decade after his death historic Louisbourg was still a jumble of ruins and shanties without further commemorative monuments.

If D.J. Kennelly with all his apparent energy and contacts was unable to preserve or commemorate the site of eighteenth-century Louisbourg, then who could succeed? In contemporary United States wealthy philanthropists, coalitions of concerned citizens, or local historical societies often came to the fore in such cases. In Canada, however, there was not the same enthusiasm (or, more important, the willingness to donate money) for historical matters. In the related areas of museums and art galleries the situation was much the same; during the early 1930s Americans spent almost three times as much per capita as Canadians did on those institutions. The explanation lies not only in a smaller and more scattered population, but also perhaps in the relative lack of a distinct national identity or sentiment in Canada at that time.

It was not long after the death of D.J. Kennelly that new appeals began to be made for the federal government to take action at Louisbourg. The most important of the advocates for government action was J.S. McLennan, publisher of the *Sydney Post* and soon to be a member of the Senate. In 1908 he declared that 'the preservation of historic sites is too large a task for

The future of Louisbourg . . . a summer series of Molière, afternoon and evening performances of baroque music, exhibitions of eighteenth-century paintings, engravings, maps and plans?

private or co-operate undertaking. Indeed, part of its significance would be lost were it not for the action of the people through their governments.' McLennan was doing in-depth research on the French occupation of Louisbourg and knew first hand the rich documentary and cartographic record the town had left behind. He pointed out that it would be possible 'to reconstruct the city as it was . . . [it] is only a question of intelligence and outlay.' While a complete reconstruction was possible, McLennan urged, at the time, the reconstruction of only a single building, which would serve as a museum.

It was one thing to recommend that a historic site be acquired by the federal government; it was quite another to find a department to administer it. Since 1885, when the government acquired the Banff Hot Springs, the Department of the Interior had managed selected natural areas as National Parks. Historic sites, however, were not initially part of Interior's mandate. A partial solution to the problem was found in 1919, when the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, an advisory group of historical specialists from across the country, was created. One of the first sites considered by the board was Louisbourg, yet it was uncertain what to recommend because of the complicated land ownership there. That situation was straightened out during the 1920s, with a series of property acquisitions. In 1926 historic Louisbourg received its first Historic Sites and Monuments Board plaques; two years later it became an *official* National Historic Site.

Once the Parks Branch owned Louisbourg it had to decide what to do with it. No one thought they could leave it as it was. One school of thought, put forth by British planner Thomas Adams, who was working in Canada on the Commission of Conservation, was to eliminate all houses on the site, do a little landscaping, and maximize the aesthetic and emotional experience of visiting a historic spot. Adams wrote that the 1895 monument was 'harmless', but that it was 'the ruins, the earthworks and the barren burying ground that make the real memorials'. A second point of view was expressed by J.S. McLennan and his fellow enthusi-

asts. They argued the emphasis at Louisbourg should be educational rather than emotional. They envisioned the actual reconstruction of various features to give the 'ordinary visitor a vivid picture of the place where events of so great historical significance' had taken place. Secondary objectives included the collection and display of documents and artifacts in a fireproof museum and the provision of research material to interested archaeologists and historians. Both approaches, it is worth noting, considered as essential the removal of the dozen or so 'modern' houses, out-buildings and fences on the site. The fact that this small community of families had lived in the area for a century and a half, and that many of their houses had survived longer than the 45-year life span of French Louisbourg, was of no apparent interest to anyone. Nor did anyone perceive that in part it was the presence of these simple dwellings in the midst of the ruins of a bygone era, that made the Louisbourg site such a popular spot for philosophizing about the passage of time.

The approach eventually adopted by the Parks Branch incorporated most of the ideas put forth by the Louisbourg enthusiasts, with the exception of the full-scale reconstruction of selected features. The program began in 1929 and continued throughout the 1930s, with additional projects undertaken in 1949, 1950 and 1955. The program consisted of preservation work on the historic casemates, the excavation of various building locations, and the uncovering of some of the streets of the original town. The culmination of the development was the construction of a museum in 1935-36, in which excavated artifacts and related historical materials could be displayed to the visiting public.

For the next quarter century Louisbourg remained largely unchanged, a site of scattered ruins and several monuments on an open landscape. Then, in 1960, the idea of rebuilding Louisbourg surfaced once more. This time the circumstances could not have been better: a generally buoyant Canadian economy, a government headed by John G. Diefenbaker looking for inspirational national projects, and a depressed local economy in Cape Breton that was generating large scale unemployment and widespread social malaise. The greatest of Cape Breton's problems lay in the coal industry: a society-wide switch to low-cost petroleum was forcing one mine after another to close, tossing hundreds of men out of work. Alternate employment had to be found and Justice I.C. Rand, in his *Report of the Royal Commission of Coal* (1960), disregarded the usual make-work schemes. He came up instead with an imaginative partial solution: the 'symbolic reconstruction of the fortress of Louisbourg'. Rand contended that a reconstruction would not only employ a couple of hundred miners, but it would also create a major

tourist attraction and be an intellectual and cultural stimulus for all of Cape Breton Island. The following year, two centuries after William Pitt's decision that Louisbourg be 'effectively, and most entirely, demolished', the Diefenbaker government gave its blessing to a multi-million dollar program to partially rebuild the place. The wheel of fortune had certainly turned.

It had taken British soldiers five months to mine and then blow up Louisbourg's fortifications. How long would it take their twentieth-century counterparts to re-erect a portion of what they had undone? No one had the answer to that question in 1961, but it turned out to be about two decades. When it began, such a project was without precedent in Canada. Never before had so much money (it grew to \$25 million in capital funding) been committed for a heritage effort, though the word 'heritage' was not yet in vogue in 1961. Most people, from politicians to the general public, saw it as an opportunity to create a kind of Williamsburg North — a major tourist attraction that would celebrate Canada's eighteenth-century past in much the same way as Colonial Williamsburg did for the United States. Others recognized it as an important research window on the past. Still others believed it was first and foremost an employment measure for disadvantaged Cape Bretoners. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s the project captured the imagination of the Canadian public, and journalists never tired of telling their readers that a visit to Louisbourg was like travelling through time or stepping back into the past.

But now in the 1980s something has changed. No longer under construction, the place has ceased to be newsworthy. Visitor totals are down from the 1970s and one wonders if Louisbourg might get left behind in the current rush to embrace the future (a desire that manifests itself in the popularity of high-tech items — from computers to videos).

It is too early to tell what impact shifts in society and in visitors' interests might eventually have on the fortress of Louisbourg. Yet, that there will be changes is beyond question. Perhaps there will be an increased use of the place as a setting for cultural events — say, a summer series of Molière and other early modern playwrights, afternoon and evening performances of baroque music, and exhibitions of eighteenth-century paintings, engravings, maps and plans. Then again, the fortress might build on its base of reconstruction trades and develop into a training centre for people interested in traditional crafts and ways of doing things. Conceivably, the years and decades ahead might witness an integration of the eighteenth-century townsite into the modern community of Louisbourg, across the harbour. Whatever happens, one can be assured that Louisbourg will continue to evolve, and that as time goes by there will be more surprising twists in its story. ♦