

ONE SYSTEM, TWO COUNTRIES?

A Tour of Eastern Canada

Kingston – Thousand Islands – Ottawa – Montreal – Quebec Old Town



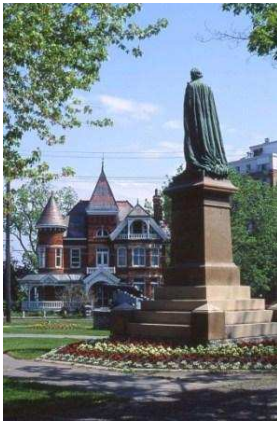
Text and Images: © John Biggs 2010

www.johnbiggs.com.au

ONE SYSTEM, TWO COUNTRIES?

A Tour of Eastern Canada

It is 1994, and I am on study leave from Hong Kong University, partly to finish a book that John, an excolleague from Newcastle days now here at Queen's University, and I had planned some time ago. We quickly discover that in the intervening time the book had evolved differently inside our respective skulls, and after unsuccessful negotiation, we agree to keep our friendship and drop the book. Which is nice, because Kingston is an ideal place for exploring Eastern Canada, perched as it is midway between Toronto and Montreal, the virtual capitals of the two Canadas. Hong Kong and China may be one country, two systems, as they put it, but I am to learn that here there is one system, two countries.



Nearly three countries. When driving to Niagara-on-the-Lake (not Niagara Falls, which is entirely different) I passed the imposing Brock Monument, which commemorates the War of 1812-14 in which the Americans invaded Canada. Some say the invasion was a diversionary tactic in a trade war with Britain, others that the US was determined to incorporate Canada. Thanks to Major Brock that didn't happen – then – but the US have been trying to get Canada back by cultural stealth ever since, using seduction of the young as their main strategy, backed up by Free Trade agreements. This subversive photo of a bear catching a salmon I took in Ottawa. Could the sculptor have been thinking of the United States as the bear and Canada the salmon? Many other countries are surrendering their cultural sovereignty to the US but the Canadians have a weapon in that cultural war that unfortunately we in Australia do not have: the equivalent of the fierce patriotism of the French Canadians.



Kingston is at the edge of winter still, flat, windy, cold, and boring, the architecture solid Victorian limestone. The City Council has forbidden high rises so as the green leaves return, the city grows a pleasing integrity of grey limestone, white paint, and green roofs that match the

grass and trees and parks.

I'm living in an old frame house fronting Lake Ontario. Kingston Yacht Club is one side and a huge limestone mansion the other. It's spring at last. A redwing blackbird is playing with a squirrel on the stone wall separating the two houses but the squirrel is irritated. It flows away in graceful arcs along the wall; another joins in and two black semicircles rise up one tree, and flow horizontally to another where I lose them in the leaves. The lake shimmers in the background. I describe this idyllic scene to a friend, and get a Canadian-style one-liner back: "Oooo. And did you see Bambi?" Suddenly it is hot, a plague of mosquitoes, then of gnats, emerge in huge hovering clouds, that clog the fly-wire, speckling the white walls. The birds go crazy, gorging on insects wherever they cling.



The history of Kingston is depicted in the old grey houses, forts and redoubts, some excellently staffed by students in military uniforms of the times. I take a tour of Fort Henry. I learned what utter hell it was: a squad of soldiers penned into small stone caverns, the only light from a hole through which the barrel of a muzzle-loading cannon once protruded. The sound in that confined space of firing the cannon would have ripped their ear-drums to shreds.



At the time of my visit, the provincial governments had a monopoly on liquor sales. The monopoly started as a nanny control measure to prevent Canadians from drinking too much, but one consequence is that the Ontario Liquor Control Board becomes the biggest single purchaser of wines in the world, able to strike magnificent bargains. They have an excellent range of French wines, especially Rhone, at knockdown prices, for example different bottlings of Chateuneuf-du-Pape from \$15 a bottle. I keep fit trudging the three miles back to my lakeside home heavily weighed down with a backpack that clinks and clanks as I walk.



I take the cruise to the 1,000 islands in the St Lawrence River, where the salad dressing comes from. Today is still, hot, and very clear; the colours of the water and trees on the islands so rich and brilliant. The islands range from small to quite large, granite outcrops covered now with grass and trees. Only a few remaining islands

are national parks – the rest were grabbed by the US and Canadian rich for their summer hideaways in the 19th century, such as the huge Rhineland-style Boldt Castle. Building on this castle was started in 1900 by millionaire Waldorf Astoria owner, George C Boldt, but when his wife died in 1904, all work stopped and the castle was derelict for 73 years, until, like our La Trobe Hospital, it was sold for one dollar. Unlike the La Trobe Hospital, however, the new owners, the Thousand Islands Bridge Authority, made it a runaway success.

At Gananoque, the heart of the 1,000 Islands, there is a lookout tower, perched between the US and Canadian borders. You can see the St. Lawrence Seaway, carved out in 1959, which, with the long existing Welland Canal into Lake Erie, allows Chicago to be linked to the Atlantic via the major Canadian ports of Toronto, Montreal and Quebec. On the way back we are entertained below by a



trio, piano, drums, vocal, the vocal walking around enlisting passengers and children in a fun-fun sing-along. The concert continues when we dock to strains of Schubert's Serenade clanging out ponderously by the City Hall carillon from its big green dome. It does this periodically, but it really shouldn't.

It's time to start exploring that other country in the system. I rent a Chevy Cavalier and head east, following the Rideau Canal, the waterway between Kingston and Ottawa. I come across a beaver dam in a beautiful park. I drive off a side road to the pretty town of Perth, with lovely stone architecture and a river running through the town centre. A back road brings me to Ottawa. A helpful friend had told



me that I should stay at the Citadel Hotel, not too expensive and in the best part of downtown. However, my friend had given me confusing directions as to how to get there. I am so cross I punish my confusing friend by choosing the Town House motel, equally accessible to downtown my map says.

But the Town House is on the wrong side of the tracks. At the desk is a squat, dark, ugly man with bulging eyes that suggest existential dissatisfaction. As I stand there, an angry guest loudly complains: “The goddam air-conditioning in Room 205 ain’t working. It’s as hot as hell in there!” The fat gnome rolls his bulbous eyes. “Ah yes,” he says, “it is very hot at last.” He turns back to his crossword puzzle. The guy storms back to his unconditioned unit, muttering threats.



Ottawa is the political centre of Canada: to the West is Anglo Canada, to the East French Canada. Ottawa has to balance in one system the claims of what to all appearances are two countries. In Ottawa itself, the television carries as many French as English channels. The French advertisements, unlike the English ads (which are often reworked American), the French ads are interesting and offbeat, they award Oscars for them. On the opposite arms from this systemic centre of Canada, however, television in English speaking Canada has more Anglo programmes, more French in French Canada. But throughout this complex system, at breakfast you can read your Kellogg’s Corn Flakes packet in English while your partner on the opposite of the table may read it in French.



Ottawa is split in two by the Rideau Canal. On the Eastern side is my Town House motel and scunge. On the Western side is the upmarket downtown and the

the Rideau Canal. On the House motel and scunge. On upmarket downtown and the

Houses of Parliament, perched dramatically on a cliff on a bend on the Ottawa River. The Art Gallery and Notre Dame Cathedral are intriguing. As I walk, I meet a friendly gardener. “Where you from?” he asks on hearing exotic tones. “Australia,” I reply. “Awesome. You come for our Tulip Festival?” I say I have (I have no idea that a tulip festival existed). “And for the Rock Festival?” “Sure,” I lie. This Canadian is so nice and friendly I don’t want to offend him.



I leave Ottawa next morning and drive to Hull across the Ottawa River and North to Gatineau Park, which encloses Meech Lake, the name of a famous non-accord. In the 1987 Meech Lake Accord, Premier Brian Mulroney tried to solve what the rest of Canada saw as “the French problem” by granting Quebec special status while still remaining part of Canada. All

provincial premiers agreed, but the Parti Québécois did not. Although there was strong general support for the accord at first, it dwindled and by 1990, a majority were against and it failed, mainly on the growing realisation that it weakened Federal powers by giving too much to the provinces (one province in particular). Mulroney did well at getting things wrong. He had spent much of his youth in the US, which was possibly why he was so amenable to signing the North American Free Trade Agreement, thereby



creating much grief for his fellow Canadians. John Howard hadn't any such tie to the US so his concluding a Free Trade agreement with the US is even more inexplicable.



Those sad stories aside, let us return to Gatineau Park, alive with chipmunks, squirrels and fine walks and views. Samuel de Champlain, who founded Quebec City, has Champlain's Lookout named after him in Gatineau Park. It oversees the Ottawa River and beyond to the Canadian Shield, a huge outcrop of granite with a magnificent ecology of beavers, bears, moose, and all other wonders of the Canadian wilderness.

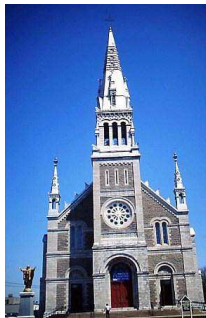


The names excite: Champlain, Mont Réal, Quebec City, *allons y!* So it's north to Wakefield, turn right and here we are in French Canada. I stop at a supermarket to provision up and find to my surprise that the shy checkout girl struggles with English, but not as much as I am struggling with long buried schoolboy French. I follow the Gatineau River to Gatineau, where seaplanes may be hired; I photograph one instead. Route 148 is confusing. I find I have to cross the Ottawa River by *Bateau-passeur* which brings me back to Anglophone Ontario again. But never mind, this route eventually becomes 40, which takes me to Montreal and thence to Quebec.



Montreal has to be little more than a stop-over, unfortunately. I meet Ross and Bron, colleagues from Newcastle days, and we walk Mt. Real and Vieux Port, Old Port. The old Cathedral is watched over by a feisty looking French soldier. I look inside the Cathedral to find it suffused in a mystical electric blue. A wedding is being conducted in one of the chapels, five white

Cadillacs line up outside to pick up the well-heeled wedding party. We visit the Botanical Gardens with a view of the Olympic Stadium, dubbed “the cell phone”, as this is how they looked in those high and far off days.



Next morning I drive along the north side of the river heading for Quebec City. The country through Trois Rivières, Grondines and Deschambault indeed bespeaks a different country. Most churches have a twin silver spire on the West front, golden statues, with a golden Madonna in the middle. Like medieval villages with their splendid churches, this seems an extravagance out of proportion to the local rural economy. I learn that the Jesuits got here first and owned all the land, which they leased to the peasants. The priests became extremely wealthy, and built huge churches. The peasants didn't become wealthy, blaming the English for their poverty rather than the priests.

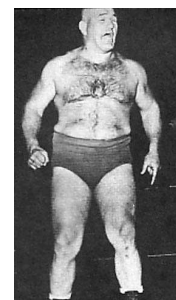


The point of visiting Quebec is the Old City. I booked my accommodation ahead, at the Fleur de Lys, within the walls in the Upper Town. But getting there! The streets and freeways occasionally change their names and numbers. I stop at a garage flummoxed. I ask directions from the proprietor but the overlap between our mutual French and English is insufficient. His very chic and beautiful wife intervenes with international gestures. Head



South at the previous intersection, I make out. In minutes I enter one of the main gates in the wall, Porte Saint Jean, and *voilà!* the Fleur de Lys. I note that Quebecois look different, they sound very different, they are more dress conscious than the general run of Canadians. Quebec is unlike either USA or Anglo-Canada.

That night I scout out the restaurants to sample a French cuisine unchanged for 300 years, so I am led to believe. I want to try my party piece, *coq au vin*, but even at 6 p.m. most places are full. I eventually get to a restaurant in a posh hotel, expensive but surely bound to be good. It is crowded but a large rugged waiter, a retired wrestler maybe, assures me he can find me a table. Could this be the notorious Quebecois wrestler, Brute Bernard? I later discover he could not have been, for Brute Bernard died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound in 1984, but my waiter could have been his son.

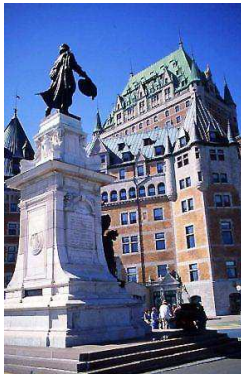


He directs me to a table where I am surrounded by school girls, wandering from table to table, screeching in English. I have struck a hormone-driven private school outing. I summon my French: “*Le bruit est insupportable!*” I complain to Brute Jr. “*Oui, monsieur,*” he replies civilly enough, “but zere is no more places.” Sigh. Intense dramas unroll in suffocating noise. A 14 year old floats past in black see-through blouse, trailing a long dress, queen to some invisible court. A massively obese child stands by the next table talking with matching volume to two teachers. Another girl is crying, others approach and hug her, a teacher calls a taxi for her. Blessedly, when I believe I shall just have to abort my *coq au vin*, the squealing horde suddenly stands as one and pours outside to fill a waiting bus. Relieved, I turn my attention to my *coq au vin*. Hmmph, stewed chicken in a wine sauce, no more, no less. The house wine is a thin red that could pass for an astringent rosé. The grape, *marechal foch*, is a hybrid that is claimed to suit Canadian conditions. There’s got to be more to Quebec cuisine than this.

There is. Next day I lunch on a garlic salad and *pissaladière*, a sort of onion jam pizza with olives and anchovies arranged prettily. Catherine and I had been trying to cook *pissaladière* in Hong Kong but something wasn’t quite right. Now I get it: cook the onions longer, and add a bit of sugar and a drop of balsamic.

With this vital information and its solid representation under my belt, I stroll along Rue St Jean well-fed and happy. A young blond woman, early twenties, attractive and well dressed, catches my eye. She detaches herself from a group of tough looking youths. “*Monnaie*”, she pleads with unconvincing piteousness. “*Pourquoi?*” I want to know what emergency has triggered this unusual behaviour from such a well-dressed woman. A torrent of French makes me no wiser. Ah well, I think, a gesture; I offer some small change in my outstretched hand. She glances at it contemptuously. “*Plus! Plus!*” she demands angrily. “*Non.*” I too am now angry, at her ingratitude and at myself for being trapped into appearing to require gratitude. I attempt to cross the road but she blocks my way with “*Plus! Plus!*” I notice her tough friends are watching with more than a little interest. Intimidated, I walk off fast. What was the game? A shocking self-insight hits me: Do I really require my beggars to grovel?





The Upper City is on a hill, with the Citadel to protect it, built by the British after General James Wolfe's capture of Quebec in 1759. Samuel de Champlain stands in outraged astonishment both at this horrifying outcome and at the huge Hotel Frontenac, which completely lords it over the Lower City and Quebec Vieux Port that he founded in 1608. Beside the Frontenac is the Terrace Dufferin, a huge wooden walkway, below which lies Champlain's original Quebec, which you



can reach either by cascading terraces of cafes and boutique shops or by funicular. This is the oldest part of N. America that is still in use – that is, by non-indigenous people – and consists of a maze of streets and buildings settled in the early 1600s, all beautifully preserved, while the Hotel Frontenac dominates the scene from on high.



I go on a guided tour to *Ile de Orleans* in the St Lawrence River, an island in the middle of the river, which is a mix of farms and a middle class hideaway. The houses with their brilliant red Quebec roofs fetch three times the price of mainland equivalent houses. The driver is a handsome French Canadian who tells us the main products of the Ile: berry fruits, *pommes de terre*, not he says to be confused with *pommes de routes*. "What are pommes de route?" I ask, as some dumb tourist is intended to ask. "Ze horse-shit!" he guffaws triumphantly. French Canadian is rich with anality, often laced with piety. *Merde de Tabernacle* is awe-inspiring in its straddling the sacred and the profane: an imaginative extrapolation from the common Canadian expression "Holy shit!"

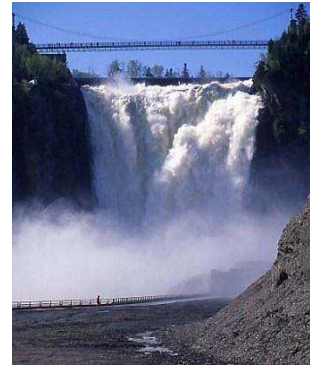


We return to the mainland and to a small village with vegetable cellars beside the road, and a bread oven. A slice of Marie's bread, famous in Quebec, spread with her maple syrup becomes *maple tartinière*, after which much teeth-sucking is needed to deliver them from evil. Ste. Anne de Beaupré is a huge church, golden crosses and towering golden statues on the West front. At the entrance on left and right are two huge pillars with leather straps that contain hundreds, thousands, of crutches, left by pilgrims as they strode out



the entrance, their prostheses unnecessary after their conversation with Ste Anne. Inside, elaborately written prayers glow high in the triforium and roof. Nearby is the Cyclorama de Jerusalem, a full 360° cyclorama of the Crucifixion, made at the turn of the century by a group of priests and artists, as they thought it would have looked to the disciples 2,000 years ago.

We return via Montmorency Falls, 100 ft. higher than Niagara Falls. When you approach close you are drenched with spray, making photography impossible. I don't get that close, as I want to take pictures, but a group of youths do, returning laughing, shirtless and drenched, even though it is cold and windy.



The Quebec Experience is a 3D holographic sight and sound show about the early French settlers, who were besieged



variously by Indians, British, and Americans. At different times the settlers allied with each of the others against the others two, according to circumstance. At the moment, they are allied with nobody in their fight against the rest of Canada, even France recently refusing to enter that war. Not being a French Canadian, I find all this puzzling. Let's try it out on Tasmania. Say Bruny D'Entrecasteaux had started a colony in Adventure Bay when he landed in 1792, and later in Recherche Bay in 1802 (which is well before Bowen and Collins landed), and that D'Entrecasteaux had instructions to annexe and settle the whole island. The settlements spread from Calais (as Dover might have been called) ever northwards to Mont Table (Table

Mountain as Mt. Wellington was once called), to Port Louis on the Seine that is what is today the Tamar River. Then along came the newly promoted Major General Bligh who, like Wolfe, ended French rule in Tasmanie, which then became Tasmania. But the French-Tasmanians still kept their language, their customs and their menus. They insist that the rest of Australia become officially bilingual; they blow up letter boxes that don't have French written on them. Tasmania has to have as many French- as English-speaking television programmes; you have to be bilingual in French and English in order to enter the Australian public service in any state. Does that help us Taswegians understand the two Canadas?

My last night in Quebec. I am careful to choose an authentic bistro-type restaurant. The customers are Americans, Anglophone Canadians, and me. Our hostess is a buxom, cheery lady, who will speak only French. The food is very good. Garlic soup, with many thin slices

of garlic on the bottom of the cream; partridge under a glass bell jar in *Perigeux* sauce. Both excellent. But the wine! No half bottles, the house wine being half litres of the ubiquitous and dreaded *marechal foch*, quite unsuited to the food. I complain my hostess, she is *desolé*.

Here I am in a restaurant popular with non-French tourists in the Latin Quarter of a city that lives on tourism and that has been nominated as a UNESCO heritage city. It seems very unlikely that our hostess can't speak English; why, she has even chosen country and western for the background music rather than Edith Piaf. So is the French thing just a veneer, over a solid Canadian foundation, put on for the benefit of tourists? The wine might suggest so, but then there is the pride, the passion for separatism, the very ambience of the Province of Quebec (not to mention the *pissaladière* and the partridge *perigeux*): one system maybe, but yes, surely two countries.

