

Three Preconfederation Painters of the Canadian City, Part II, James Duncan

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Volume 16, numéro 2, octobre 1987

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017789ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017789ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

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Citer cette note

Caulfield, J. (1987). Three Preconfederation Painters of the Canadian City, Part II, James Duncan. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 16(2), 190–195. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017789ar>

Résumé de l'article

James Cockburn, James Duncan et Joseph Légaré sont des peintres réputés auteurs de scènes illustrant la vie citadine et le paysage urbain de la période précédant la Confédération. Leurs œuvres peuvent être considérées soit comme des artefacts culturels liés à la vie sociale et éclairant la compréhension de la période; soit comme des objets esthétiques relevant du domaine semi-autonome de l'Art et qui doivent être examinés dans le cadre de la sociologie critique; ou encore comme des documents historiques offrant un témoignage direct sur le paysage urbain, physique et social, d'avant la Confédération. Cet article s'intéresse davantage à la première approche, tout en indiquant certaines orientations de recherches relatives aux deux autres approches.

Research Note/Note de recherche

Three Preconfederation Painters of the Canadian City

Part II

James Duncan

Jon Caulfield

Résumé/Abstract

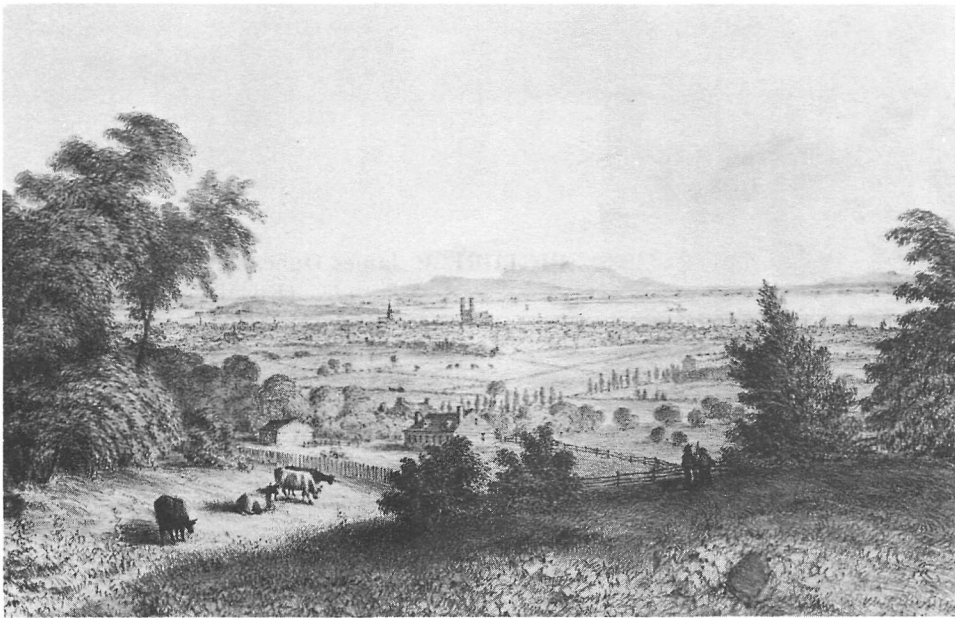
James Cockburn, James Duncan et Joseph Légaré sont des peintres réputés auteurs de scènes illustrant la vie citadine et le paysage urbain de la période précédant la Confédération. Leurs oeuvres peuvent être considérées soit comme des artefacts culturels liés à la vie sociale et éclairant la compréhension de la période; soit comme des objets esthétiques relevant du domaine semi-autonome de l'Art et qui doivent être examinés dans le cadre de la sociologie critique; ou encore comme des documents historiques offrant un témoignage direct sur le paysage urbain, physique et social, d'avant la Confédération. Cet article s'intéresse davantage à la première approche, tout en indiquant certaines orientations de recherches relatives aux deux autres approches.

James Cockburn, James Duncan and Joseph Légaré were the foremost painters of pre-Confederation Canadian cityscape and city life. Their work may be treated as cultural artifacts, linked to and suggesting insights about the period's social life; as aesthetic objects within the semi-autonomous realm of "art," to be treated within the context of critical sociology; or as historical documents offering direct evidence about pre-Confederation urban physical and social landscape. The present article emphasizes the first approach, while also indicating some directions for inquiry within the second and third approaches.

Canada's three foremost painters of cityscape and city life in the hundred years after the Conquest were individuals of diverse social roots and cultural moorings: a gentleman-officer stationed in the colony with the army of occupation; a middle-class Irish immigrant who entered the mainstream of the colony's anglophone culture; a *nouveau riche* Quebec nationalist. Not surprisingly, images of the city in their work

vary. Among these differences are instructive illustrations of aspects of status and ethnicity in pre-Confederation urban Canada.

What we know of the biography of James Duncan¹ (1806-1881) fits well with knowledge of early Nineteenth Century patterns of Irish emigration.² Before the Great Famine of the 1840s a majority of Irish immigrants to North America were from Ulster, mainly middle class Scots Presbyterians, of both urban and rural backgrounds. Many were young men seeking opportunities in America unavailable in



PICTURE 1: James Duncan. *Montreal (From the Mountain)*, 1843. (Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.) A Duncan lithograph of Montreal, in “picturesque” style.



PICTURE 2: James Duncan. *The Quebec Tandem Club, Champ de Mars, Montreal*. (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Neg. No. 68CAN109. Cat. No. 953.186.1.) Montreal’s middle class at winter leisure.

Ireland. The Passenger Acts of 1816, enacted in part to deter this diaspora of the Irish Protestant business, professional and artisan class, instead prompted the migrants to shift direction from their preferred destination, the United States, to Canada and the Maritimes. Some eventually continued across the border; others, encouraged by a more stable economic climate, the availability of good agricultural land for those who meant to farm, and better urban employment prospects for artisans and the commercially-oriented, remained in Canada.

Duncan, a Scots Presbyterian, emigrated to Montreal from Coleraine, north of Belfast, in 1825, at the age of nine-

teen. There are three main data about his assimilation in the culture and social structure of colonial urban Canada’s emerging middle class.

The first is the character of his artistic work. Duncan painted landscape, genre and portraiture largely guided by Montreal’s bourgeois and petty bourgeois market. Unlike, say, James Cockburn³ and Thomas Davies,⁴ members of the officer-corps, or George Heriot,⁵ a colonial postmaster, Duncan’s art was not pastime but commercial profession, in which he was responsive to prevailing taste. His landscapes, for example, were often characterized by commonly popular picturesque conventions,⁶ and his genre was sometimes rem-



PICTURE 3: James Duncan. *St. Patrick's Society Parade*. (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Neg. No. 70CAN309. Cat. No. 951.258.23.) As they were for James Cockburn, (See Part I of this series in *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XVI [June 1987]), scenes of city sociability - markets, streetlife, winter activities - were among Duncan's favourite themes.



PICTURE 4: James Duncan. *Bonsecours Market Scene in Winter*. (McCord Museum, McGill University, Montreal. No. M316.) Duncan was one of several 19th century Montreal painters who worked in Bonsecours Market.

inherent of the cheerful, cherry-cheeked *habitants* of Cornelius Krieghoff, favourites of the anglophone commercial and administrative class (and not so among the francophone middle class).⁷

A second indicator of Duncan's social position and outlook was his busy and diverse professional and entrepreneurial life. Besides painting, he worked as a topographer, draughtsman, lithographer, engraver, photographer and ambrotypist, activities which apparently led to partnership in one successful small business, Young and Duncan, in the 1850s, and proprietorship of another, Duncan and Company, in the 1860s. (Young and Duncan may have been a fairly innovative commercial undertaking; its main commodity was portrait photography, quite a new craft at the time.) Too, he instructed drawing and art at several Mon-

treau schools and as a private tutor. And he worked as an illustrator for a number of popular histories and magazines. Miller has characterized the early Nineteenth Century Irish emigrant of Duncan's demographic group as "the young man on the make, imbued with acquisitive entrepreneurial values" who, in seeking the New World's material and social possibilities, "listened to the whispering of ambition."⁸ Certainly Duncan was a man of a vigorous work ethic, strongly motivated toward professional and business achievement. While Duncan was commercially successful during his lifetime, though, Canadian art history has subsequently nearly forgotten him — facts which Spendlove suggests are related. "No artist has been more neglected . . . , although he was probably for some years the best water-colourist in Canada. . . . Probably the 'conspiracy of silence' was due to the fact that he was in business and therefore possibly looked down upon"⁹

PICTURE 5: James Duncan. *Celebrated Blind Fiddler, Montreal.* (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Neg. No. 73CAN353. Cat. No. 951.158.10.) Among Duncan's most interesting city work are his sketches of Montreal streetlife.



PICTURE 6: James Duncan. *Selling Canadian Homespun Cloth, Montreal.* (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Neg. No. 64CAN62. Cat. No. 951.158.11.) Duncan's Montreal sketchbooks include depictions of cloth, maple sugar and poultry vendors and, in one sketch, a street artist showing his work.

A third yardstick of Duncan's place in colonial society was occasioned by the Rebellion of 1837, when members of the anglophone middle class, worried that the rebellion threatened their social and commercial hegemony, volunteered for militia service and secured Montreal while regular troops chased the rebels. Among their number, Duncan was commissioned a light infantry lieutenant. (Unlike the case of Cockburn, we do not have a document authored by Duncan to assist understanding his worldview. We do, however, have the text of Bosworth's popular history *Hochelaga Depicta*, which Duncan illustrated, and which offers insight about middle class anglophone attitudes toward the events of 1837. The volunteers were remarked for a "laudable spirit of loyalty and zeal" in enlisting in the Empire's defense; the rebels, on the other hand, were mainly manipulated people: "Ignorant and uninstructed as the great mass of the French people unquestionably are, they are easily misled by designing men. . . . That grievances existed need not be denied; but there were other and far better modes of removing them

than the criminal ones which were resorted to."¹⁰ Tranquility and civility were, we have noted,¹¹ central elements of imperial ideology; and a main offence of the rebellion's leadership seems to have been a regrettable lapse from polite discourse.)

Duncan's work, then, occurred in the context of the cultural and commercial constraints of the anglophone middle class. In — or in spite of — this context Duncan, like Cockburn, was attracted to the city and city life rather than natural landscape or rural life as a main focus of his art; during his career he produced a substantial volume of city painting. His view of colonial Montreal is more fragmented than Cockburn's organic image of ordinary life and streetscape in Quebec, work mainly of a piece. In style, theme and mood, Duncan approached the city more diversely. In consequence, however, his image of Montreal is also more complex than Cockburn's Quebec.



PICTURE 7: James Duncan. *Ice Cutting on the St. Lawrence at Montreal*. (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Neg. -No. 73CAN362. Cat No. 950.66.1.) Cutting and hauling ice from the river was another common theme of 19th century artists.

Duncan's production of city art for the commercial market was varied, including depictions of various newsworthy incidents (the funeral of General D'Urbain, a fire which destroyed the Hayes mansion, the Gavazzi riot); picturesque watercolour cityscapes of Montreal from the mountain and river; portraits of stereotypical tuqued and pipe-smoking *Canadiens* in Bonsecours market (while Krieghoff's Quebecers were usually rural people, Duncan's were city-dwellers); and a view of middle class Montrealers — members of a local sleighing club — at play (among anglophone burghers and tourists, sleighing pictures were quite popular). The illustrations commissioned for *Hochelaga Depicta*, on the other hand, are precise architectural drawings of important local buildings (like Short's and Cockburn's work in Quebec, they are valuable historical documents¹²).

Among Duncan's most interesting city work were his sketchbooks of pencil-and-watercolour studies of streetlife — market activity, a sidewalk musician, a maple-sugar vendor, middle class "swells" and "lady swells" dressed in fashions of the 1840s, parades of Catholic and Protestant Irish religious societies. He drew these from life for sale or for use in his studio, and they are good examples of the topicality he found marketable to local customers and popular magazines. (They include a pencil sketch of a street artist showing a market vendor, whom he has just painted, her picture — a scene Duncan may have drawn from his own activity.) In these vignettes of city people and city sociability in which buildings and background matter hardly at all, Duncan's work varied from Cockburn's topographic set-pieces.

The image of the city in Duncan's work, then, is more varied and often more intimate than that of Cockburn's. In substance, however, it is not dissimilar. Urban life is well-ordered with few intimations of social or personal tension or conflict (the Gavazzi riot is an exception) — so far as Dun-

can's painting is concerned, for example, the events of 1837 might not have occurred. Hence, one reading of Duncan's city-work is that it illustrates a vital function of bourgeois art: maintenance of dominant social and moral values. Another reading — not necessarily an alternate reading; art's "meanings" are not always consistent — is that, in the streets of the mercantile city to which he was drawn as an artist, Duncan, like Cockburn, found both *gemeinschaft* and organic solidarity. Cockburn, however, the visiting gentleman-officer, nearly always seemed personally distant from his subjects — an outsider looking in — in a way that Duncan, engaged in the colony's social fabric, usually did not.

The city paintings of James Duncan, then, together with those of James Cockburn, whose city work was discussed in the first article of this series, and of Joseph Légaré, who will be discussed in a third article, are in part of interest as documents; from Cockburn and Duncan we have some sense of how colonial Canadian cities looked, and from Duncan and Légaré we have some sense of how these cities felt. In part, they are of interest as examples of varieties of Nineteenth Century Canadian painting in the urban field: topographic landscape, picturesque landscape, topical genre, historical depiction. And in part they are of interest because they reflect diverse social perspectives toward the colonial Canadian city — among others, the perspective of anglophone culture (Cockburn and Duncan) contrasted with francophone culture (Légaré); the perspective of painters who approached the city personally, apart from the context of the popular market, (Cockburn and Légaré) contrasted with one whose approach to the city was mainly commercial (Duncan); the perspective of middle class Canadian society (Duncan and Légaré) contrasted with that of a visiting colonizer (Cockburn).

In all of these ways these artists' work is of special interest to students of Canadian cities and city life.

NOTES

1. For more information on Duncan's life and career, see W. Martha E. Cooke, *W.H. Coverdale Collection: Paintings, Water-colours and Drawings* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1983), 64-68; Paul Duval, *High Realism in Canada* (Toronto: Clark-Irwin, 1974), 12; J.R. Harper, *Painting In Canada: A History*, 2nd edition (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 106; Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), 39-40; F. St. George Spendlove, *The Face of Early Canada: Pictures of Canada Which Have Helped to Make History* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1958), 65-66; Patricia Todd, "James Duncan," in *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Volume XI (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 284-86; Donald B. Webster, *Georgian Canada: Conflict and Culture, 1745-1820* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1984), 209. For reproductions of Duncan's work, see especially Mary Allodi, *Canadian Watercolours and Drawings in the Royal Ontario Museum* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1974), plates 673-733; Cooke, *W.H. Coverdale Collection*, plates 153-65.
2. For more information on early Nineteenth Century Patterns of Irish emigration, see Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 135 ff.
3. For more information on Cockburn, see Jon Caulfield, "Three Preconfederation Painters of the Canadian City, Part I - James Cockburn," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XVI (June 1987): 69-74.
4. For more information on Davies see R.H. Hubbard, *Thomas Davies in Early Canada* (Toronto: Oberon, 1972). Also see Cooke, *W.H. Coverdale Collection*, 61-62; Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974), 62-65; Reid, *Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 26-27; Harper, *Painting in Canada*, 49-50; Spendlove, *Face of Early Canada*, 14-17; Webster, *Georgian Canada*, 208-9.
5. For more information on Heriot, see *Gerald Finley: Postmaster-Painter of the Canadas* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983). See also Cooke, *W.H. Coverdale Collection*, 112-16; Harper, *Painting in Canada*, 51-52; Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada*, 65-67; Reid, *Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 27-29; Spendlove, *Face of Early Canada*, 26-30; Webster, *Georgian Canada*, 211.
6. For more information on picturesque colonial art, see Caulfield, "Three Preconfederation Painters, Part I."
7. See Reid, *Concise History of Canadian Painting*, 65-68.
8. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles*, 173.
9. Spendlove, *Face of Early Canada*, 65.
10. Newton Bosworth, *Hochelaga Depicta: The Early History and Present State of the City and Island of Montreal* (Montreal: William Grieg, 1839), 231, 250, 252.
11. For more information on imperial ideology, see Caulfield, "Three Preconfederation Painters, Part I."
12. For more information on Canadian documentary art, see Sylvia Antoniou *et al.*, *The Painted Past: Selected Paintings from the Picture Division of the Public Archives of Canada* (Ottawa, Public Archives of Canada, 1984); and J. Burant, "Visual Records and Urban Development," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine* XII (February 1984): 57-62. For more information on Short, see Antoniou, *The Painted Past*, 16-19.