

The Canadian Liberty Bell

On the chilly morning of November 23rd 1837, a bell rang the tocsin in St.Denis in the Richelieu valley. It mustered between 200 and 300 men around Dr Wolfred Nelson in order to prevent the British army from arresting Louis-Joseph Papineau and 22 other MLAs. Their arrest as rebels would have led them to death by hanging.

These « Patriotes » equipped with only a hundred old hunting muskets, succeeded in stopping the army from invading the village. Thus Papineau had time to leave the place, get to St.Hyacinthe and reach the USA in Vermont. This victory was made possible in the afternoon thanks to another 200 Patriotes coming from St.Antoine, Verchères and Varennes, led by George Étienne Cartier, future « father » of the Canadian Federation.

The results of this rebellion have gradually been enlightened, over the past 150 years, by historians and political analysts. In Upper Canada as well as in Lower Canada, it has brought about the evolution of this country towards a « responsible » government in 1848 and the federation created in 1867.

Let us sum up the historical facts. At the beginning of the 19th century, the newly formed Canadian colonies of Quebec, Ontario and the Maritimes were globally exploited for their natural resources by merchants and politicians from England. These came for a few years, as friends of the Governor. They managed to make plenty of money, neglecting schools, roads, hospitals. The elected assemblies were unable to answer the needs of the local population in the face of these wrongdoings and a deep discontent developed in the 1830s.

Canadians saw their American neighbors prospering rapidly, largely because they were masters of their own destiny. The same was happening in Europe and in Latin America : everywhere nations were looking for governments that would work for their welfare. In Lower Canada, Louis-Joseph Papineau was fighting the « Clique du Château » and in Upper Canada William Lyon MacKenzie was facing the « Family Compact.»

Petitions and resolutions were sent to London, but the answers were always negative. Gradually, people were coming to the idea that only an armed rebellion would correct the situation. Even though they knew that the British army was the strongest in the world at the time.

Governor Gosford had signed warrants against the leaders. Instead of sending a few policemen to proceed, he ordered two army corps: one of 350 men from Montréal through Sorel and the other of 550 men from Chambly. They were to subdue St.Denis and St.Charles and take as prisoners all the leaders hidden in the area

Liberation began in St.Denis

In Quebec, the revolt started the 23rd of November; in Ontario, it began on the 4th of December, when MacKenzie and his friends marched down on Toronto to oust the Family Compact.

The call to arms was done in St-Denis by the bell called Marguerite-Michel, rung by the sacristan Edouard Lussier at the request of Dr Wolfred Nelson. At the time there were no radios, no telephones, no social medias. This bell was essential. That is why we call it our LIBERTY BELL.

Even though the victory in St.Denis was followed by a few military defeats, England rapidly understood that she had to evolve. Ten years later, in 1848, Governor Elgin was mandated to choose, from then on, the ministers (the executive) from among the elected members so that the people would control the expenditures. Democracy and real freedom were thus implanted in this country.

Many former Patriotes were members of the succeeding cabinets between 1848 and 1867. Among them George Étienne Cartier, Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine. They enjoyed so much their newly won liberty that they adopted rapidly many important laws that shaped modern Canada.

But because of the numerous complexities of the double majority required in the Union system, they began in the 1860s thinking of a federation that could include the Maritime colonies. In February 1867, the House of Commons in London adopted the BNA Act that created the said Canadian federation, where Quebec and Ontario regained their status as autonomous states.