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Writing the Convent in New France: The Colonialist Rhetoric of Canadian Nuns¹

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Most writing by women that has survived from before the fall of New France—perhaps most writing by women during that period—was done by nuns in the seven communities founded before 1763: the Ursulines, the Hôtel-Dieu, and the Hôpital-Général in Québec; the Ursulines of Trois-Rivières; the Hôtel-Dieu and two uncloistered institutes, the Congrégation de Notre-Dame and Sisters of Charity of Marguerite d'Youville in Montreal.²

While the nuns wrote above all to promote the spiritual vitality of their communities, they also provide a unique female perspective on the colonial milieu. Marie Guyart, Catherine Simon de Longpré, and Marguerite Bourgeoys are the best known women religious from the era that began with the arrival of the French foundresses in 1639 and lasted into the 1670s when they were replaced by Canadian-born nuns; but, as we will see, numerous other nuns in this first group wrote about their efforts to establish a beachhead of the Gallican Church in Canada. The second period from about 1680 to 1725 was dominated by the first generation born in the New World—Marie Morin of the Hôtel-Dieu of Montreal or Jeanne-Françoise Juchereau of the Québec Hôtel-Dieu—who sought to consolidate the work of the foundresses by writing annals of communities that had become thoroughly Canadian. The third period, exemplified by Marie-André Regnard Duplessis of the Hôtel-Dieu of Québec, had to cope with the discouraging realization that Canada was on the periphery of France's colonial interests.

Thus, instead of examining Canadian convent writing as spiritual discourse, this article focuses on how it embodied the rhetoric of colonization by which the settlers explicitly or implicitly justified France's enterprise in the New World. The intersection of convent writing³ and this colonialist rhetoric is particularly revealing because the two share multiple features. First, both subordinate the individual entity, whether a nun or a colony, to some

larger whole. When a nun writes she invariably promotes the vitality, present and future, of her monastery and order. The rhetoric of the colonizers justifies the introduction of metropolitan culture into the colonized territory. Second, the most famous of these texts, such as those of Marie Guyart or Samuel de Champlain, gain from being read in light of more routine examples. Thus the need for the kind of extensive inventory of published convent writing attempted in the bibliography. Finally, just as Canadian nuns accepted their subordinate position in the Church, while simultaneously extending the frontiers of what was permitted to women (Choquette 655), so the settlers seldom called into question their dependency on France, even though they constantly maneuvered to make a system designed for the benefit of the mother country work for them.

Convent Genres in the New World

Before addressing the colonialist rhetoric of convent writing, a survey of the chief genres that Canadian nuns brought with them from Europe will be useful. Although many nuns must have written little, and strict rules governed the writing that was done, Tridentine convents were textual communities governed by the written word; nuns exchanged abundant texts with the outside world and produced numerous others for internal use. The Post-Reformation era saw the renewal of genres that had flourished in the Middle Ages, such as the letter and chronicle, and the flowering of new ones such as the spiritual autobiography modeled on Teresa of Avila.

Rules, constitutions, directories, customary books regulated the operation of the convent. While male superiors usually took a leading role in their production, the contribution of the nuns was not insubstantial. Thus, when the original Ursulines, who came from both Tours and Paris, wanted their own constitutions in 1647, they turned to the Jesuit Jérôme Lalemant, but Marie Guyart wrote the *Règlements* that accompany them. The constitutions of most new or reformed orders enumerate a good dozen registers and record books that convent officers were required to keep, often in *armoires à deux* or *à trois clés* for security. Such registers can be found in the archives of Canadian communities, and, as Guyart's *Règlements* show, the French practice of naming a nun as secretary to aid the mother superior was followed in the New World (213–15). Convents produced a broad range of requests, legal briefs, and letters for civil and ecclesiastical authorities; all were written in Canada with the exception of printed legal *factum* published as part of court proceedings. The letters that nuns wrote to family members, friends, and patrons are particularly abundant among the texts that have survived from Canada. Nuns created numerous texts to preserve corporate memory: journals of day-to-day activities; annals and chronicles; necrologies and death notices called *abrégé de la vie et des vertus* sent to other convents of the order. All these genres were well represented in Canada, and between 1690 and 1725, when the original foundations reached maturity, annals flourished. Nuns wrote devotional treatises, hymns, and poems, and they translated Latin religious texts. These are all attested to in Canada, except for translations from Latin, but Marie Guyart did translations into Amerindian languages.⁴ The Canadian communities do not seem to have recorded the discourses delivered by the mother superior to her nuns, although we know that such talks were given in Canada.⁵ Teaching nuns wrote textbooks, catechisms, and prayers for their

students, even if convent schools seemed to have most frequently used texts authored by priests; no examples by Canadian nuns seem to have survived.

Finally, nuns in Canada wrote the best-known and yet most private form of convent texts: accounts of spiritual development. The only complete published examples of this genre that have survived are those of Marie Guyart, but fragments of such texts by Catherine Simon de Longpré and Marie Barbier were included in their biographies.⁶ These autobiographical accounts grew out of many shorter forms—resolutions made during retreats, notes taken for examination of conscience, personal vows, reflections, meditations, diaries, to name just a few. The 1671 biography of Catherine Simon de Longpré by her director, the Jesuit Paul Rageneau, incorporates examples of most of these forms.

Thus, all the major genres of convent writing seemed to have been produced in Canada; the printed record is particularly strong in letters and *relations*. In contrast, there are significant gaps in the lay secular genres: no fiction seems to have been written during the colonial period, and no newspapers were published. After Marie Guyart, the most prolific and versatile nun writer was the eighteenth-century *hospitalière*, Marie-André Regnard Duplessis, whose multifaceted work deserves much more attention.

Convent Writing in a Distant Colony

Canadian convent writing was notably marked by the material circumstances of life in the New World. Writing materials were not produced locally and had to be ordered from France. In her appeal for donations of supplies published in the 1664–65 *Jesuit Relations*, the superior of the Québec Hôtel-Dieu asks for seven reams of various kinds of paper and material for making ink (Thwaites 49: 206, 210). Similar appeals are found in her 1665–66 and 1666–68 letters (Thwaites 50: 162; 51: 114). As late as 1745, writing about interruptions in supplies caused by the War of Austrian Succession, Geneviève Regnard Duplessis (sister of Marie-André) complains to a supplier in Dieppe: “Il n’y a pas jusqu’au papier qui est cher et rare à présent” (6: 48). The need to rely on French suppliers of writing materials is symptomatic of mercantilism that left the colony dependent on the mother country for the simplest manufactured goods. Convent archives in Canada contain numerous examples of correspondence with business and financial firms in France. The best-published examples are found in the two Regnard Duplessis sisters’ letters, where one finds orders, receipts, proxies, and balance sheets.

Climatic conditions not found in France influenced how writing was done in convents in New France. The long frigid winter nights reduced privacy, as nuns huddled together in common rooms sharing a fire. Albert Jamet quotes a 1653 letter of Marie Guyart: “On n’écrit ici en hiver qu’auprès du feu et à la vue de tous ceux qui sont présents” (*Correspondance* 515). Thus Jamet believes that she saved the composition of longer intimate texts, such as her *Relation de 1654*, for the period between June and August when the length of summer evenings gave her the light and privacy to pursue more complicated writing projects (*Écrits* 2: 20).

The arrival of the annual fleets from France in late spring and summer brought replies to letters written the previous fall, and the end of the sailing season in October and November turned the Canadian autumn into a marathon of letter writing. Because a ship

could always fall prey to storms or capture, prudence dictated sending any important message on more than one boat, necessitating multiple letters and duplicates. When no answer was received the following summer to a letter sent the previous fall, pressure could be put on a correspondent in subsequent letters by hinting at abandonment or disaffection. In 1742, writing to a Dieppe apothecary, Marie-André Regnard Duplessis blames interruptions caused by war for lack of news from “nos amis de France,” all the while affirming “Je pense que vous ne nous avez pas oubliées” (6: 50). In 1763, after the British victory, Marguerite d’Youville gives the topos a new twist when writing to friends in France: “Donnez-nous donc de vos nouvelles [. . .] c’est la seule consolation, dans l’abandon que la France fait de nous, d’avoir des nouvelles de nos amis” (214). The relative isolation of the Canadian communities from their sister communities in France made the normal practice of sharing news among houses of the same order even more important. They cultivated what was called “l’union mutuelle” by exchanging circular letters, annals, and customary books to preserve common identity and practice.⁷

Although New France never had a printing press, texts by at least nine nuns were published before the Conquest. Texts by well over twenty other nuns who wrote during the French colonial period have since been published. Even in France, few nun authors directly published their own texts; most of their writing was printed through the mediation of a male ecclesiastic, usually after the nun’s death. The remoteness of Canada from French publishers probably heightened the need for such intermediaries. This was indeed the case of the two most prominent Canadian nuns published during the colonial period: Marie Guyart, edited by Claude Martin, her Benedictine son, and Catherine de Simon de Longpré by her Jesuit director. Short texts by five Ursulines and hospital nuns, generally the superiors of their houses, were solicited by the Jesuits for their *Relations*.

Among the rare exceptions to male intervention are texts of Marie Guyart that appeared in two Ursuline publishing enterprises. Letters she wrote in 1669 and 1670, just before her death in 1672, show that Guyart had responded to the appeal from the Paris Ursuline convent for contributions to the two-volume history of the order’s communities that Marie-Augustine de Pommereu would publish in 1673 as the *Chroniques de l’Ordre des Ursulines*. Pommereu takes pride in the “fonctions apostoliques et angeliques au milieu des sauvages” (1: 379) undertaken by the Canadian Ursulines in her introduction to texts by Guyart. Jeanne de Cambounet de la Mothe’s 1684 *Journal des illustres religieuses de l’Ordre de Sainte-Ursule* proposes a short biography of a holy Ursuline followed by a few of her maxims for each day of the year. Starting in 1677, Guyart’s life, letters, and retreats had been printed in France, making her by 1684 the most published member of her order. Thus, her biographical entry is longer than most in the *Journal*, and the seventeen pages of extracts from her writings count among the most extensive. A final example of women publishing Canadian women is part of a letter by Marie-André Regnard Duplessis that appeared in her friend Marie-Catherine Homassel Hecquet’s 1755 *Histoire d’une jeune fille sauvage trouvée dans les bois*. Hecquet used a letter describing Inuit culture from her long-time Canadian correspondent to argue that the feral child found near Châlons-sur-Mame was of Inuit origin.

The correspondence surrounding the 1728 *Vie* of Marguerite Bourgeoys shows that even when the initiative came from the nuns, they could not escape male intermediaries. While

Claude Martin had taken it upon himself to write and then publish his mother's life, and Bishop Laval entrusted Paul Rageneau, the former director of Catherine Simon de Longpré, with the task of writing the *hospitière's* biography,⁸ the sisters of the Congregation themselves seem to have set in motion the biography of their foundress. Surviving letters from 1715–16 show that in 1715 the nuns looked first to Charles de Grandelet, dean of the Québec cathedral, who had previously put together a collection of Bourgeoys' writings (Lemire-Marsolais 3: 205–24). Not only did the Congregation's superior send him relations written by senior nuns who had known the foundress, she also sent a list of requests for revisions when his first draft was not completely to the nuns' liking: "quelques-unes de nos soeurs ont fait quelques remarques que l'on croit devoir vous communiquer a raison que ce livre sera lu de bien du monde" (Lemire-Marsolais 3: 217). At this point, however, arrangements passed out of their hands. First, the order's Montreal confessor, François Citoys de Chaumaux, expressed the intention to publish Grandelet's book (3: 213, 217). But for unknown reasons this biography did not find its way into print. The order's subsequent confessor, Pierre-Herman Dosquet, took up the project and commissioned one of his relatives in France who had never known Bourgeoys to write a new biography that was indeed published in 1728.⁹ The fact that Dosquet had been ordained a bishop in 1725 and would be named administrator of the diocese of Québec in 1729 probably favored its publication.

The Colonialist Rhetoric in Convent Writing: The Pioneers

Beyond such material constraints that shaped writing practices in the colony, Canadian convent writing employed a rhetoric that appropriated all aspects of life in New France to justify the colonial enterprise. Canada's geography, indigenous peoples, economy, history—and in the case of convent writing, spiritual life—were all described so as to validate the introduction of metropolitan culture into the colony. To be sure, during the course of the French regime, the arguments used to justify the colonial tie were subject to modification as conditions in Canada changed and as the balance of power in Europe shifted for or against France. Moreover, although the writing we are examining was done in the colony, and all the nun writers took pride in their link with France, their own view of this bond evolved as the first generation of French nuns was replaced by Canadian-born ones, and as both Canadians and the French recognized the specific traits of the creole society being created in Canada.¹⁰ The Canada of the 1750s, with a strong settler foothold in the Saint Lawrence valley and trading links with Indians throughout the Great Lakes and Mississippi, was a far cry from the precarious fur posts that doubled as Jesuit mission centers, as when the nuns arrived in 1639. Finally, explicitly or not, all writing about Canada had to confront the fundamental distrust of the Canadian adventure by public opinion in France; as Heinz Weinmann has aptly put it: "cette question, humiliante aux yeux des Canadiens, du coût et du rapport de la colonie pour la mère patrie" (97).

The appropriation of the New World space and its native peoples dominated early convent writing.¹¹ The chief genre of the newly arrived nuns, the letter or report sent back to supporters in France, emphasizes the conquest of space. Such *relations*, written by both *hospitières* and Ursulines, contained what might be called *révélés de traversée*. The arduous

crossing was a site of ascetic heroism where the nuns suffered willingly for their apostolate. At all times, they maintained their status as women set apart by observing cloister as much as circumstances would permit and by saying their daily communal office. Descriptions of the initial establishments of the hospital nuns in Sillery and of the Ursulines in Québec familiarized European readers with the territory they were being asked to support with prayers and funds. Cécile Richer's September 1639 letter to her Ursulines sisters in Dieppe published in Marie Guyart's correspondence is perhaps the most complete example of this genre (951–60).¹²

Neither the Ursulines nor the *hospitalières* were initially sent to serve the French in Canada. Their mission was to bring Frenchness to the Indians by founding a "seminary" for the education of Indian girls and by ministering to Indians dying in epidemics. Thus, their initial letters emphasized the Indians' receptiveness to the Christian message and contained reports of converts who often died shortly after baptism. Such stories of the progress of the missions, rather than the *récits de traversée*, found their way into the *Jesuit Relations* of 1640 and 1642.

An account by Marie Forestier, the superior of the Québec Hôtel-Dieu, published in the 1657–58 *Jesuit Relation* illustrates how Indians could be assimilated to the French model, at least on the level of discourse. It did not take long for the initial optimism of the nuns about the receptivity of the Indians to Christianity to fade. Indians came to be seen as licentious, undisciplined, and allowing their children too much freedom. However, Forestier reports that the Huron girl Geneviève-Agnès shared none of these flaws. "Son esprit n'avait [. . .] rien de sauvage, et son nature était excellent" (Thwaites 44: 262). Far from being unchaste, she was a paragon of innocence (44: 270). Although Indians did not use corporal punishment on children, she was willing to be scourged by the nuns for her faults (44: 264). She completely overcame the Indian penchant for liberty, and embraced the obedient humility required by convent life (44: 268–70). The girl was so completely assimilated that a nun recently arrived from France took Geneviève-Agnès for French. Indeed, the young Huron was received into the Order as soeur Geneviève-Agnès de Tous les Saints on her deathbed and thus became the first Amerindian nun. This text, in fact, is a shorter example of the *abrégé de la vie et des vertus* that Forestier would write ten years later narrating the life and virtues of the Hôtel-Dieu's candidate for sainthood, Catherine Simon de Longpré (Thwaites 52: 56–96). The two accounts follow the same pattern: Christian parents who nonetheless oppose the girl's vocation; virtue that came almost naturally; perfect resignation to death. If Geneviève-Agnès lacked the visions and mystical life of Catherine, the young Indian at least was able to form "mille colloques amoureux à notre Seigneur" (44: 274) before dying. It is fitting that this Indian who read and wrote better than even the French girls in her class (44: 262) to the point of becoming indistinguishable from them, was memorialized textually in one of the most standard genres of convent writing.

By 1668, eleven years after Geneviève-Agnès's death, Colbert was envisaging a mixed race of Europeans/Indians for the colony that had recently become royal. However, in her letters of the period, Guyart was skeptical about the king's wish "que l'on francise [. . .] peu à peu tous les sauvages, afin d'en faire un peuple poli" (*Correspondance* 821). She lacked funds to dress her young Indian charges "à la française," a key part of this scheme (821), and moreover she confessed the difficulty of convincing them to give up their "savage

ways." She admitted that only seven or eight girls had been "francisées" in her many years in Canada. Nonetheless, she maintained that conversions had been numerous among her Indian pupils. "Les autres qui sont en grand nombre, sont toutes retournées chez leurs parents, quoique très bonnes chrétiennes" (828).¹³ Given this belief that her charges could be converted without integrating them into French society, it is not surprising that she enumerated the many translations that she wanted to complete before her death: a sacred history and dictionary in Algonquin, an Iroquois dictionary and catechism (801). Such translations would not have been needed if all the Indians had been assimilated.

Only many years later in the eighteenth century would nuns routinely acknowledge to friends back in France the difficulty of truly converting most Indians, as does the Montreal hospital nun Véronique Cuillerier writing to her mother community in La Flèche in the 1720s: "Je ne puis vous faire comprendre la barbarie de ces peuples qu'il est impossible de civiliser et même d'humaniser" (*L'Hôtel-Dieu* 275). Only around 1725 did the Ursulines drop their missionary vow to instruct the "petites filles sauvages."¹⁴ In 1756, at the very end of the French Regime, Marie-André Regnard Duplessis echoed Cuillerier. Except for a few Christianized villages, "les autres nations sont enveloppées dans les plus épaisses ténèbres, et ne regardent nos mystères [. . .] que comme des rêveries" (4: 114). This view of the Indians corresponds to the transformation of the Saint Lawrence valley into a settler colony with Indians concentrated on reserves or dispersed in the *pays d'en haut*.

However, the nuns did not need to convert Indians to turn the expanse of New France to their spiritual advantage. The writings of Catherine Simon de Longpré quoted in her biography show how a territorial appropriation of Canada could take place within the confines of her cloister. For Catherine, the Canada of 1648 was merely the stage where she could play out most fully her chosen role of sacrificial victim. According to Ragueneau, "Elle sortit donc de Bayeux regardant le Canada comme le lieu où Jésus Christ l'appelait, et où elle devait être la victime de son saint Amour" (38). When tempted to return to France in the first years after her arrival in 1648, she vowed herself to Christ as his "perpétuelle servante et esclave en ces contrées" (60). For her "ces contrées," Canada, were above all a place of suffering, rather than mission country. She was rewarded in a very American way when beginning in 1662, some fourteen years after her arrival, the Jesuit martyr Jean de Brébeuf, repeatedly appeared to her and even became her director. The journal of her spiritual development, where she consigns these apparitions, cannot be used, as can writings of Marie Guyart, to document life in the colony. Catherine's journal is an allegory. Beset by visions of spiritual devils who tempt her in the new land, she is rescued by an American saint who had been martyred by flesh and blood Iroquois devils.

Settler Voices from the Colonial Convent

The shift of emphasis from the Indians to the French settlers and the soldiers sent to defend them began as early as 1644 when the *hospitalières* left the Jesuit reservation at Sillery to build their hospital in Québec City itself; as François Rousseau points out, the shift became definitive with the destruction of the Huron missions in 1649–50 (1: 55). Through their landholding that supplied income and produce, the convents gradually entered into the agricultural economy of the settlers whom they serviced. For example, the Hôtel-Dieu's

seigneuries provided about 21% of the community's income, making them the most important revenue source (Rousseau 1: 151). The *Annales* of the Québec Hôtel-Dieu thus contain a very different travel account from the ones of 1639. Instead of a difficult Atlantic crossing, they relate a joyous excursion in July 1714 to inspect the farms on a small island which the nuns had recently purchased (393–97). They returned to Québec, proud to have made such “une bonne acquisition” (396) of land made fertile by French industry. They gaze on their new property with the same self-satisfaction that assimilated the Huron postulant Geneviève-Agnès to the community.

Once the nuns had achieved settler status, *récits d'incendie* replaced the *récits de traversée* as the exemplary spatial narration.¹⁵ Cold winters made Canadian convents particularly vulnerable to fires that jeopardized years of patient accumulation. Like travel to Canada, fire was on the whole a passive experience, something to be endured, although fire did provide more opportunity for heroic action by the nuns. The accounts of fires, whether in annals or letters follow much the same pattern. The danger first required immediately securing what was most precious: lives, property, sacred vessels, and the Blessed Sacrament. As the embers died down, the community tested its support network. Other convents, or in some cases male religious houses, took in the homeless nuns, and lay benefactors met to offer advice and funds for reconstruction. Finally, the nuns' entrepreneurial skills entered into play as they oversaw the rebuilding. Even when a convent did not experience fires itself, it included disasters that struck other communities in its annals as reminders of the danger and of the need to extend hospitality. Thus the *Annales* of the Hôtel-Dieu of Québec recount the 1650 and 1686 fires of the Ursulines (79–80, 225–27) and the 1701 and 1705 fires at the seminary (303–4, 321–22).

By the time New France became a royal colony in 1663, the shift in emphasis to the settlers had been confirmed. Marie Guyart wrote the next August that the Ursulines were primarily occupied with the instruction of the settler girls: “Il n'y en a pas une qui ne passe par nos mains, et cela réforme toute la colonie, et fait régner la religion et la piété dans toutes les familles” (*Correspondance* 735). This quotation also suggests how the nuns reconciled the new emphasis on the settlers with their original religious mission. They saw in New France a chance to recreate the fervor of the primitive Church far from the indifference and wickedness of France. They could plausibly sustain this vision at least until the mid 1660s when, under Colbert's plans for colonial development, the population of Canada was doubled by immigrants and soldiers who did not share the nuns' zeal. Writing in 1669 in the wake of these changes, Marie Guyart deplored the arrival of “beaucoup de canaille” who involved themselves in the liquor trade with the Indians (*Correspondance* 863). Marie Morin complained in 1697 in the annals of the Hôtel-Dieu of Montreal that the five thousand or six thousand soldiers sent to subdue the Iroquois “ont ruiné la vigne du Seigneur et établi le vice et le péché, qui est presque aussi commun à présent que dans l'ancienne France” (96). The failure of the colony's missionary goal to the Indians is thus paralleled by the failure to create among the settlers a devout society embodying the best of the Gallican Church. In 1753, writing to her childhood friend back in France, Marie-André Regnard Duplessis makes this explicit. For her, Canada is the mirror reflection of France with all its evils, instead of the purified, improved version of France the colony's more idealistic founders had envisaged. Except for Jansenism and Protestantism, Canada

suffers from all the ills of France: “Je regarde le Canada comme l’écho de la France pour les vices, l’intérêt, la mauvaise foi et le libertinage. Le luxe, la bonne chère, toutes les pompes du démon y sont étalées” (4: 51; cf. 2: 76).

The unenclosed status of Marguerite Bourgeoys’s Congrégation de Notre-Dame gave its members access to Canadian space from Louisbourg to Montreal and allowed them to serve the settlers with more flexibility than the cloistered Ursulines and hospital nuns. It is thus fitting that almost all Bourgeoys’s surviving texts defend her original vision of the unenclosed life for women who imitate the Virgin Mary by remaining free to serve the local Church wherever they are needed. Indeed, most such texts date from the end of her life when the second bishop of Québec, Saint-Vallier, tried to impose “régularité.” As Bourgeoys points out, “la Sainte Vierge n’a jamais été cloîtrée” (82). In her hands, every genre of convent writing could be put to use to reiterate this message. For example, her “Prière à la Sainte Vierge” implores the Virgin to assure that only women who have this vocation be admitted to the company (19); her autobiographical texts describe to her initial desire to be part of such a group in Troyes (235–36) and recount her three trips to France in search of suitable recruits and protection for her ideal of an uncloistered community. The Congrégation’s usefulness can be seen in the fact that in 1760 when Canada passed under British control, with seventy members, it was twice as large as any other order (Trudel 2: 338).

Subjects of Distant Kings

When the nuns began writing their annals in earnest in the 1690s, they had become so Canadian that their history became one with the history of the colony. The annals narrate this history from a providentialist perspective in which kings and intendants, wars and natural disasters, exist only for the good of the convent, that is, to test or reward its virtue. Convent annals, after all, are meant to inspire successive generations of nuns to imitate the heroic example of their predecessors. While the election of officers, the profession and death of members, and other such milestones provide the spine of their annals, the nuns also included reports on political, military, and economic events in Canada. Generally, the annalists took care to narrate these external factors in terms of their impact on the convent community: intendants were benefactors; wars brought wounded to be nursed. The annals interpret victories of French arms against the British as signs of divine protection; “C’est le Seigneur qui a combattu pour nous” says Marie Morin of the 1711 defense of Québec (271). Indeed, when one considers the expansive way in which these victories are recounted in the annals, one senses a pride that is as patriotic as religious; the annalists saw themselves as worthy colonial subjects of His Most Christian Majesty, and were happy to linger over French triumphs. The Avant-Propos of the most polished of the annals, those of Québec’s Hôtel-Dieu, offers a sweeping historical account that ranges from the expeditions of John Cabot in the fifteenth century to the death of Louis XIV in 1715. In this Avant-Propos, one even finds the hope that such history will “satisfaire la curiosité des religieuses, qui, en lisant ce livre, pourraient souhaiter d’apprendre quand et comment on a établi cette colonie” (1). Such curiosity about secular history was normally not considered appropriate for nuns, but Canadian nuns were not recluses. One is struck in reading their annals to see the importance the nuns placed on being knowledgeable about outside events that they

knew would have an eventual impact on their community. Catherine Porlier's continuation of the annals of the Montreal Hôtel-Dieu make ample reference to battles of the Seven Years War, despite its modest title, "Petite relation des différents événements arrivés dans notre monastère depuis la fin de l'année 1756."

Providence might never be called into doubt, but royal decisions could be subjected to indirect criticism. With considerable understatement, Regnard Duplessis tried to make the best of the peace signed at Utrecht in 1713: "Quoiqu'elle ne fût pas à des conditions bien avantageuses à la France, elle ne laissa pas de nous faire espérer que tout irait mieux" (*Annales* 383). She went on to demonstrate that the crown's expectation that Louisbourg would be a worthy replacement for Plaisance in Newfoundland was illusory. Nonetheless, the closest she came to acknowledging that Versailles consistently sacrificed the colonies to France's strategic interests in Europe is the following statement on the situation in 1713: "Les affaires de France ne permirent point à la cour de penser à nous" (385). It was too painful to admit that in the eyes of the court, continental hegemony in Europe was more important than a distant colonial empire.

In a society that subordinated females to men, the women's communities experienced the colony's dependence on the French state in a particularly intense way. Despite the nuns' services to New France, the crown closely supervised their growth; it regulated the number of members allowed, set the amounts required for dowries, and had to authorize expansion. The case of the Hôtel-Dieu in Québec is telling. As a military hospital, the Hôtel-Dieu had special claim on the royal treasury. In fact, in about half of the years prior to 1760, the state provided over 50% of the hospital's income (Rousseau 1: 114). This dependence required the leadership of the Hôtel-Dieu to cultivate both the royal officials in Canada and those in France. The fact that their *Annales* include many examples of how the first generations of nuns obtained the favor of authorities testifies to the desire of the community's elders to pass on their expertise to future generations (189, 206, 222, 302). The lesson did not go unheeded, and the hospital's archives contain correspondence from the last decades of the colonial regime with such figures as the governor La Galissonnière, the intendant François Bigot, and the marquis de Montcalm. It is no accident that much of this correspondence is with Marie-André Regnard Duplessis who wrote the *Annales* at the beginning of her career and became the community's most dynamic leader during this later period. In other cases, respectful silence was the prudent course, according to the annals of the Montreal Hôtel-Dieu. In 1727, after the death of Bishop Saint-Vallier, the diocese was divided over who was the rightful grand vicar. The intendant supported one rival, but the nuns of the Montreal Hôtel-Dieu chose a prudent course. "Je n'écris, mes chères soeurs," says Véronique Cuillier in concluding her account of the affair, "que pour votre instruction dans la suite des années si pareille affaire arrivait, qu'il faut, dans un cas semblable, s'armer de prudence et s'attacher à l'autorité légitime" (175).

The nuns were particularly adept at playing the local colonial authorities off against metropolitan ones. When Saint-Vallier tried to use his episcopal authority to impose enclosure on Congrégation de Notre-Dame, the head of the order, Marie Barbier, sent a point-by-point critique of the bishop's proposed Rule to the superior of the Sulpicians in Paris (2: 57–69), which Marguerite Bourgeoys herself seconded (221–23). Barbier's letter, signed by her two assistants to give it more weight, offers an example of how the nuns won allies

by combining deference with a calm determination to stand their ground. Sulpician intervention indeed proved decisive in deterring Saint-Vallier.

As the final war approached, we increasingly find criticism of the crown and less confidence in its support. For example, a 1751 letter written from France by the brother of Marie-André Regnard Duplessis suggested that she had been trying for some time to bring the Hôtel-Dieu's problems to the attention of royal authorities in Versailles, but to no avail. The brother wrote, "J'ai fait l'usage que vous marquez du mémoire que vous m'avez adressé [. . .] mais il y a lieu de croire que les commis du bureau s'entendent avec ceux qui sont les auteurs de vos maux (277). Little wonder that she writes her friend in France in 1758: "Nous n'avons reçu aucun secours de la cour; la guerre occupe trop pour penser à nous" (4: 116). About the same time she wrote a letter of consolation to a sister of the Congrégation who had been stationed at Louisbourg, but who had been sent to La Rochelle by the British after that fortress's fall in 1758. That nun, Marie-Marguerite Daniel St-Arnaud, replied with the fear that the entire colony would change hands: "ce qui augmente notre peine, c'est de penser combien notre cher Canada est en danger de subir un tel sort" (Lemire-Marsolais 5: 93-94).

After the defeat, the mother-superior of the Hôpital-Général, Marie-Joseph Legardeur de Repentigny, used the traditional circular letter to point out explicitly this disconnect with the crown. She wrote to communities back in France what was ostensibly an account of her nuns' edifying devotion to duty during the siege but was really an appeal to French nuns to lobby on behalf of the Hôpital (Roy, "Marie-Joseph Legardeur" 78). She managed to praise the loyalty of the Canadians to the French monarchy, the heroism of the French soldiers, and even the goodwill of the British occupier (23-24). Yet because of the French king's refusal to honor his obligations, the monastery faced financial ruin: "le dérangement de notre temporel ne venait pas de notre faute, mais bien de la part de la cour, par laquelle il nous est dû vingt mille livres, des avances que nous avons faites pour la nourriture des troupes du Roi de France" (23-24). This antagonism directed at the French court reflects the fact that the convents had become thoroughly Canadian institutions dominated by women with ties to the local elite. The corporate interests of these communities, intent on self-preservation, took precedence over the bond to a crown that was unable or unwilling to provide for its colonies.

Thus when Canada passed to Britain, the nuns did not hesitate to invoke the same Providence that had preserved them from the New Englanders' assault led by Phips in 1690¹⁶ to justify adapting to their new colonial masters. Marguerite d'Youville wrote in August 1763:

Nous avons été surprises et nous nous sommes toujours flattées que la France ne nous abandonnerait pas, mais nous nous sommes trompées dans notre attente; Dieu l'a permis ainsi, son saint nom soit béni. Si nous sommes aussi libres d'exercer notre religion et de faire tout le bien que nous trouvons à faire comme nous l'avons été depuis que nous sommes sous la domination anglaise, nous ne serons pas à plaindre pour le spirituel, mais pour le temporel, il y aura plus de misères; on ne trouve pas à gagner sa vie avec eux comme avec les Français. (215)

Her regret that it was easier to make ends meet under French authorities did not prevent her sending a letter three months later congratulating James Murray on his appointment as governor and asking for his protection (218). New Year's greetings to General Thomas Gage followed at the end of December (219). Like other superiors in Canada, d'Youville was well versed in the rules of *civilité*, and, like them, she used *lettres de compliment* to advance her community's interests. Thus, when one colonial regime gave way to another, we find Canada's nuns putting to use with British administrators the skills they had honed dealing with French ones; likewise they continued, at least in the short term, the practice dating back to 1639 of seeking support from benefactors in France by writing letters and *relations* about their needs and successes.

In 1718, the authors of the annals of the Hôtel-Dieu of Québec had lauded Louis XIV for ignoring "les plaintes de ceux qui n'aimant pas le Canada lui représentaient souvent la dépense qu'il y faisait sans en retirer aucun profit" and expressed the pious wish that his great-grandson would continue to protect the colony: "Dieu veuille que Louis XV affectionne comme ses illustres aïeux cette pauvre colonie [. . .] afin que sous son règne nous nous relevions des misères qui nous accablent" (6). When Choiseul preferred the Antilles to Canada in 1763, the nuns turned their attentions from the ministers of Louis le Bien Aimé to George III's representatives.

Conclusion

Transplanting convents to New France epitomized the imposition of the metropolitan model on the colony. New orders like the Ursulines or recently reformed ones like the *hospitalières* of Dieppe were the avant-garde of the Gallican Church in 1639. The ideal of "régularité" which they embraced included both Tridentine enclosure and dowry payments. In the primitive conditions of Canada, enclosure was even more an obstacle to the nuns' teaching and nursing missions than it was in France, and the dowry system eventually hampered the recruitment of Canadian-born nuns (D'Allaire 96–98). This quest to recreate in New France an institution that was in many ways incompatible with the Canadian needs suggests that convents had a symbolic function beyond their teaching or hospital apostolate. Marie Guyart linked the success of the women's convents to the overall morale of the colony: "Les maisons religieuses qui sont ici font une partie des plus considérables de la colonie, et que si une seule quittait, cela serait capable de décourager la plus grande partie des Français" (1 septembre 1652: 476). Ann M. Little has shown that a century later convents "served as a convenient political symbol" of the difficulty of anglicizing Canada for France's American and British enemies (197).

Although the nuns failed in the project of *francisation* of the Indians, the convents functioned as islands of Frenchness in the wilderness. This is perhaps best exemplified by their chapels where nuns sang the same motets by André Campra and Jean-Baptiste Morin that could be heard in Parisian convents; in many cases, they had even written the arrangement, when they had not composed a new piece (Gallat-Morin 246). This taste for sophisticated music is reflected in Marie-André Regnard Duplessis's short manuscript book, *De la Musique spirituelle*, which wittily compares musical harmony to harmonious community life.

Québec's Ursulines and hospital nuns wrote so much because they arrived with the tradition of keeping careful records and maintaining ties with sister communities. Fewer texts seem to come from the Montreal communities, and in large measure this can be attributed to the fact that they were not founded on the same strict Tridentine model that required enclosure. The *hospitalières* of Saint Joseph of the Hôtel-Dieu arrived as *filles séculières* and only became cloistered in 1671. Their major texts date from after this period, when Marie Morin, their first Canadian-born member, took it upon herself in the 1690s to write their history. Her *Histoire vraie et simple* that narrates the life of her community until 1724 lacks the polish of the Québec Hôtel-Dieu annals, whose authors came from more distinguished families, but Morin's work was continued by Véronique Cuillerier and Catherine Porlier through the end of the French regime, while the Québec annals end around 1720. The Congrégation de Notre-Dame does not seem to have produced a body of writing comparable to the Ursulines or hospital nuns. With higher dowry requirements, the latter probably attracted recruits with more accomplished writing skills; in addition, their cloistered status was more conducive to creating and archiving texts than the relative freedom of *filles séculières*.

If the colonial impulse is the mother country's attempt to clone itself, the Canadian nuns represent a spectacular success. They duplicated the two innovations in the religious life for women found in France: the newly founded enclosed communities dedicated to service such as the Ursulines and *hospitalières*, as well as the unenclosed institutes like Marguerite Bourgeoys's and Marguerite d'Youville's communities. More importantly, all these communities quickly became Canadian as the foundresses from France were replaced by nuns born in America. The male orders, on the other hand—the Jesuits, the Recollets, and the Sulpicians—did not recruit widely in the New World. The last French-born nun of the Hôtel-Dieu of Montreal, Charlotte Gallard, put it this way in 1713: "ma consolation, c'est de laisser une communauté florissante, toutes canadiennes d'un vrai mérite et de la plus solide vertu" (266). By the Fall of New France, the Canadian communities had successfully adapted a European model to conditions in America and were completely autonomous administratively from their mother houses in France.

Their writing practices inherited from France reflected this transition. The first wave of nuns who came to Canada had been formed in the hotbed of Counter Reformation France and sent back numerous letters reporting on the success of the missions; the elite among them, such as Marie Guyart and Catherine Simon de Longpré, composed intimate texts that recorded their spiritual progress. But such mystical fervor seemed to have waned in Canada by the early eighteenth century, just as it did in France. The spiritual texts that have survived from after 1720 are less autobiographical and more oriented toward shared edification.¹⁷ The most important eighteenth-century texts are historical accounts often written for the internal use of the community, and they increasingly show an awareness of a Canadian identity. After the fall of Canada, whether the nuns wrote to France, as did Marie-Joseph Legardeur de Repentigny, or to the British administrators as did Marguerite d'Youville, they had no difficulty putting traditional convent genres to use for the survival of their communities. Certainly we must regret that so little writing by Canadian laywomen has survived. But the institutional loyalty that characterizes convent writing and the fact that the women's communities played central service roles in the colony made the

nuns' texts splendid witnesses to the evolution of colonial Canada from seventeenth-century French missionary and fur trading outposts to what Britain hoped in 1763 would become the northern anchor of its North American empire.

Notes

1. My thanks to Maureen F. O'Meara and Mary M. Rowan for their suggestions on drafts of this article and to the Québec Ministère des Relations internationales for funding.
2. Chantal Théry's book on women's writing in New France might better be subtitled *Religieuses de la Nouvelle France* since only one laywoman, Elisabeth Bégon, is treated. Théry hardly moves beyond what Julie Roy calls in her 2006 article "la Sainte Trinité des manuels." Despite its short length, Roy's article offers an excellent overview on writing by nuns of the period. I expand her bibliography and use a less generic approach. Leslie Choquette gives the best history of these communities in English; see Marguerite Jean for an earlier overview in French that situates them in a perspective extending into the Vatican II era. I refer to the nuns by their family names rather than their names in religion. Spelling has been modernized in French quotations.
3. For an introduction to French convent writing, see Carr, "Mainstreaming." Zecher shows how Guyart can be given a postcolonial reading.
4. According to the annals of the Québec Hôtel-Dieu, Marie Renée Boulic exchanged witty madrigals and epigrams that were much admired with the intendant Jean Talon (187). Marie Morin says that Judith Moreau de Brésoles composed hymns in the style of John of the Cross (178–79). None seem to have survived. However, three stanzas of verse written at Québec's Hôtel-Dieu in 1751 by Marie-Madeleine Lepage and Marie-Anne Lajoue have been printed. Lajoue's rejoinder to Lepage's prediction of a disaster striking the community's church displays the wit that the annals attribute to Boulic (Casgrain 2: 388–90). In her letter of 9 August 1668, Marie Guyart lists her translations from French into Indian languages (*Correspondance* 801). They were given to Oblate missionaries in the nineteenth century and are now missing (note 5, p. 804).
5. In his condolences to the nuns of the Québec Hôtel-Dieu upon the death of their mother-superior, Marie-André Regnard Duplessis, Jean-Olivier Briand refers to her "paroles pleines d'onction et de l'esprit de Dieu par lesquelles elle tâchait, ou de vous consoler, ou de vous animer à la vertu." Cited by Casgrain 3: 433. See Carr, *Voix* 21–53, for an overview of this preaching by women.
6. Extracts of Glandelet's biography, "Recueil touchant la soeur Marie Barbier, fille séculière de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame," held in the Archives of the Séminaire de Québec, are published in vols. 2 and 3 of Lemire-Marsolais.
7. A section of the Hospitalières' 1666 constitutions is devoted to such means of maintaining this "union mutuelle" (380–82).
8. Guy Oury discussed the history of the composition and publication of this biography in the first chapter of his own biography of the nun (7–24).
9. Michel-François Ransonnet, *Vie de la soeur Marguerite Bourgeoys*. Avignon/Liège, 1728. For the publication history, see Lemire-Marsolais 3: 327–41.
10. Gérard Bouchard has described this creole mentality at the time of the Cession: "La différenciation culturelle avec la mère patrie [. . .] était apparemment en marche parmi les élites. Mais rien n'indique que celles-ci aient accédé à une conscience nationale. Enfin, aucun segment de la population ne semble avoir exprimé une volonté de rupture ou remis en question d'une manière ou d'une autre l'ordre métropolitain" (91).

11. Carole Blackburn, Allan Greer, and Sara E. Melzer discuss the effort to “franciser” the indigenous peoples in terms of postcolonial theories.
12. Other examples include Marie Guyart’s letters in her *Correspondance* 84–89 and a longer account in the *Relation de 1654*, 241–47; Anne Le Bugle in Guyart, *Correspondance* 967–70; *Annales de l’Hôtel-Dieu de Québec* 14–18. The fragments of Marguerite Bourgeoys’ letters that have survived contain short accounts of her trips back to France.
13. See Trudel, *Les Écolières*, for more details on her pessimism on this point, 55–57.
14. Trudel, *Les Écolières*, 61.
15. Marie Guyart on the December 1650 fire of the Ursulines: *Correspondance* 408–23; on their 1686 fire: extracts from the annals in *Les Ursulines de Québec, depuis leur établissement* 1: 431–36; Marie Morin on the 1695 fire of the Hôtel-Dieu of Montreal: 238–49 and the 1721 fire: 272–80; Cuillerier on their 1734 fire: 167–73; Marie-André Regnard Duplessis on the 1755 Hôtel-Dieu fire: (1929) 4: 55–58; Marguerite d’Youville on the 1765 fire of the Hôpital-Général: 226–32.
16. Morin 271; *Annales de l’Hôtel-Dieu de Québec* 257.
17. The best examples are the unpublished writings of the Regnard Duplessis sisters. Marie-André’s *Dissection spirituelle*, *Liste des pâles*, *Notice sur le crucifix outrage*, and *Notice sur la Sainte-Famille*. Likewise, her sister Geneviève’s *Manne de Bethléem* and *Réflexions sur le mystère de la passion de notre Seigneur* remain in manuscript.

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Published Writing by Nuns in New France

The first five entries are arranged chronologically and contain texts by nuns. The list that follows is arranged by the nun's family name, with her name in religion in parenthesis, followed by her dates of birth and death and community affiliation [CDN = Congrégation de Notre-Dame; UQ = Ursuline of Québec; HDQ = Hôtel-Dieu, Québec; HDM = Hôtel-Dieu, Montréal; HGQ = Hôpital-Général, Québec]. In order to assess which texts were selected for publication during the colonial period, I list the first publication as well as recent accessible ones. When a text appeared in what are now known as the Jesuit Relations, I so indicate with the abbreviation *JR* followed by the publication date of that relation. See Thwaites for exact title, name of Jesuit editor and publisher.

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