

Together We Fight

“Genevieve!”

I laughed as my sisters came running at me.

I had just arrived home from my shift. I work all week at the house of Louis-Joseph Papineau, the leader of the Legislative Assembly. I was just approaching a special week off. That may sound very exciting to constantly be in the home of the leader of all French citizens, but I am a scullery maid. I make dinner for the master and wash the dishes when he finishes with all his delicacies.

But I do it for my family. Living here in the mid-1800s, we have a large family. Ma (Hanna), Pa (Jack), Molly, John, Aspen, Margaretha and Francis (twins), and myself, Genevieve. Together, we make up the Combattante family. Combattante means fighter; we're called that because we persevere and fight for what is right.

It is always a tad bit frightening, coming home on the train. There have been many rebellions between the Legislative Assembly (the French) and the Executive Assembly (the British). Telegrams are very expensive so my family and I cannot communicate. I never know what I will find.

I silently exhaled in relief as I was tackled by Margaretha and Francis. When they finally decided that I was still the same person I was when I left, I embraced the rest of my family. I breathed in the scent of fresh bread, my home.

It was then that I noticed that something was different. It wasn't visible but I could feel it in the air. It was that kind of feeling that makes your skin prickle. I looked at Pa for answers and I didn't like what I saw.

His forehead was creased with worry and he had dark bags under his eyes. I had never seen him like this before and it scared me. What was going on?

I looked at Ma and saw the same results. She locked eyes with me and I could see nights of bad sleep in them. I was about to say something but Ma gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head and I kept my mouth shut. I was worried. Whatever had happened was so bad that they couldn't even tell my siblings.

I sat heavily in my chair. The stew and bread we ate sat well with me and gave me another reminder of my home. I had almost forgotten what I had seen earlier until Pa got up and strode towards the door.

He turned around and loudly spoke, looking at me out of the corner of his eye. He winked.

“Children! It is time to go and do your chores! Genevieve, I need you to come to the market with me.”

Pa was treading dangerous ground. Market day is Wednesday and it was Thursday. They would just have gone yesterday. Luckily, my siblings were already bustling about and did not notice.

I grabbed a shawl and followed Pa out the door.

When we got to the barn he directed me inside and spoke in a low, urgent tone.

“Genevive, mon cherie, Queen Victoria sent a messenger to stop the rebellions a few weeks ago.”

I almost interrupted him with a shout of joy but his words did not explain his fear.
Three weeks? Why didn't they tell me? Why is that bad?

"This man, we have heard of him. He is trouble for the lot of us. Please watch your back, don't tell your siblings, and stay close to home."

Now I was getting scared but I told myself that I was fifteen and I could deal with this kind of thing. I kept my face serious and nodded.

"Je t'aime, ma fille." He hugged me and stroked my hair, which he knew I loved.

We headed back inside and I started to wash the dishes. Molly settled in beside me and we settled into chatting about what I had missed. When we finished, since there was nothing left to do, we sat down and continued talking until we were jarred out of our conversation.

There was a loud banging on the door and frantic yelling. Molly and I jumped out of our seats and rushed to the door but Ma was already there. She flung open the door and Madam Voisine came tumbling in.

"Caroline! Whatever is the matter?" Ma cried.

"It's the nasty messenger man! He has come out with his report and is announcing it in the square at six o'clock sharp! According to Madam Potins, it is very important and we should be there."

As we digested this news Ma ushered her out the door, soothing her.

"It shall be okay, suave Caroline. Merci."

Ma and Pa had been gone for two hours already and it was getting quite dark outside. I was fretting terribly. But, just as I was about to scream with worry, they hustled in the door. Their eyes were black with fear.

“We are not safe, Genevieve. He is a horrid man and he wants us gone. Que Dieu nous aide.” Pa said, his voice shaking. He relayed the story to me and I quickly understood his fear.

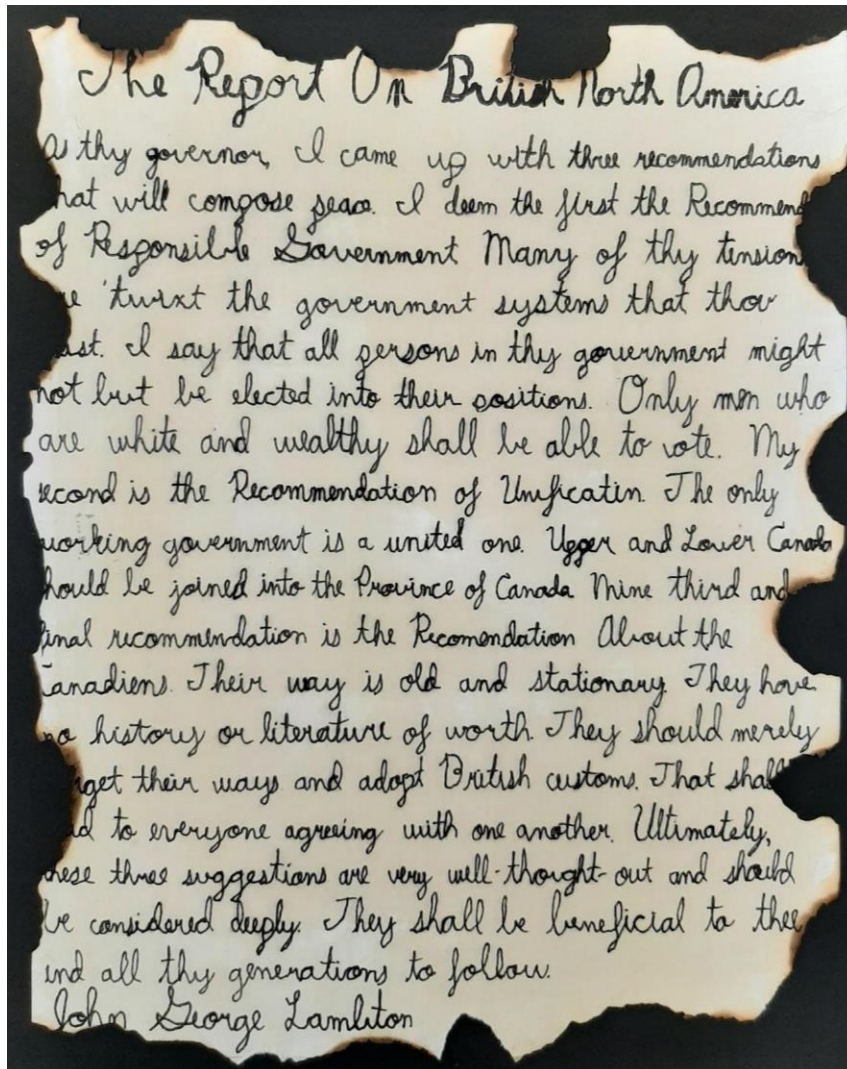
A man called Lord Durham had come to stop the rebellions with three recommendations. The first was called the Recommendation on Responsible Community. The horrid man suggested that both parties, the Legislative and Executive, both elect their government. Then he went on to say that the only people allowed to vote were white, wealthy, men.

The second recommendation was called the Recommendation of Unification. This recommendation was reasonable. He suggested that Lower Canada (where the French live) and Upper Canada (where the British live) be united together and be called the Province of Canada. He said that the only effective form of government was a united one.

My father's voice trembled as he relayed the third recommendation to me. It was called the Recommendation About the Canadiens. He thought that one of the reasons for the rebellions was cultural differences. He said that it would be better for the French to lose their culture and adopt the British ways. The words straight from his mouth were horrid and atrocious.

“The Canadien way is old and stationary. They have no history or literature of worth.”

Pa swallowed hard and spoke a suggestion that I actually liked. He thought we should go to bed and said that the government was reeling and would have come to their decision in the morning. I couldn't sleep. All I did was pray.



The Report On British North America

As thy governor, I came up with three recommendations that will compose peace. I deem the first the Recommendation of Responsible Government. Many of thy tensions are 'twixt the government systems that thou hast. I say that all persons in thy government might not but be elected into their positions. Only men who are white and wealthy shall be able to vote. My second is the Recommendation of Unification. The only working government is a united one. Upper and Lower Canada should be joined into the Province of Canada. Mine third and final recommendation is the Recommendation About the Canadiens. Their way is old and stationary. They have no history or literature of worth. They should merely forget their ways and adopt British customs. That shall be said to everyone agreeing with one another. Ultimately, these three suggestions are very well-thought-out and should be considered deeply. They shall be beneficial to thee and all thy generations to follow.

John George Lambton

“Au revoir, Pa. Ma. Molly. Aspen. Margaretha. Francis. John. J't'aime. Je vous verrai bientôt. J' t'aime.” When I told them I would see them again soon, it stuck in my throat. I did not know if it would be true.

The government made their decision. They rejected the first recommendation and accepted the second. Sadly, they unofficially adopted the third. The new government was to be strictly British men and the new language in the Province of Canada was English. I was being carted off to be a maid in the house of Lord Sydenham because the Legislative government was no more and the French were now much lower than the British.

As I got in the carriage, I wiped a tear from my cheek and steeled myself against more. I would be strong, a combattante. I knew God was with me at that moment.

I sat down beside two other unfortunate maids and turned to the one next to me.

“Ida!” “Genny!” We both exclaimed at the same time. I was both happy to see her and sad that she had the same fate as me. I saw her every Sunday at mass and sometimes she would come and sup with me.

“How are you doing, amie?” We engaged in small talk until the bumpy ride was over and we arrived at a luxurious house. We gaped at each other as we were ushered from the truck to our quarters. Her last name was Champignon and since mine is Combattante and they did things alphabetically, we both got placed on mopping the floors.

After a light dinner, we settled into our beds and tried to get used to our new life as a maid in the monstrous house of the monstrous Lord Sydenham.

It had been almost eight years since I arrived at the house of Lord Sydenham. Ida and I had been able to go home for a fortnight at Christmas and seven days at Easter.

We had been forced to stay in the palace and were not even allowed to practice Catholicism.

We looked different. Our hands were rough and calloused from the splintery mops and we had obtained the rough, edgy look of someone who has not had a lot of food and has had bad sleep for many years.

We felt different too. Our hearts had hardened against the British and we had a constant fire of hope inside us. It had started as an ember but was now a roaring blaze.

The reason it hadn't burned out is because the French were fighting back. Ida and I were in support of two French men who were forming a resistance to responsible government and no assimilation called the Reformers of Canada. Their names were Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin. They spoke up for us and came to convince Lord Sydenham that we needed a responsible government. So far, they have not succeeded.

The protests were the only thing that kept us going as we methodically cleaned the floors every day. Oh, and the eavesdropping. Whenever we heard someone talk about something interesting we stopped and listened. I know it was sinful and I feel guilty now, but it fed the fire.

That day, LaFontaine had come here to talk to Lord Sydenham again; we were pretending to clean the floors right outside his door.

We were listening closely so we didn't see a guard on his rounds. He came up behind us and cleared his throat noisily. We whipped around and tried to come up with a good excuse.

We looked very suspicious, I knew. We both stood in front of Lord Sydenham's private meeting room on a clean floor and not doing much with our hands.

"We were getting shoes for the master!" Ida said, and I looked at her quizzically.

"She means we were cleaning the floors extra well because Lord Sydenham loves to pace in front of his door; consequently his black shoes leave scuff all over." I gestured around us, mentally patted myself on the back and went back to mopping. Then I froze. How could I have been so stupid? Lord Sydenham did not have black shoes! He wore shiny copper-coloured ones!

I hoped the guard wouldn't notice but he saw me freeze and noticed my mistake.

"Lord Sydenham has copper shoes, young maid, and maybe you should see him and his copper shoes with your friend here." This made me tremble but I stood my ground.

"I'm sorry but I think I heard my mistress calling. Coming Madam Rigoreaux!" I took Ida by the hand and pulled her along quickly. We got down the hall and peeked around the side of the wall. The guard was gone!

We snuck back out to where we were before and started actually mopping the floors.

All of a sudden I heard a scream and saw a guard roughly grab Ida. I tried to make a break for it but I felt rough hands on my arms, holding me back.

“We take eavesdropping very seriously in the Province of Canada and you do it on Lord Sydenham himself? You and your vile friend are going to the dungeons until we can see what to do with you!” Monsieur Moyenne had come with a party of three or so guards at the call of the one we dealt with, no doubt.

I twisted violently but the guard was stronger than me. I did know the rules and Ida and I were breaking a big one. We also *just happened to be* French.

When we got tired of twisting, they started walking us down countless flights of cold stairs. Once Ida tried to break free and succeeded! She tried to run but a guard tripped her and she tumbled down the cement stairs. When they got her back she had a gash on her forehead and couldn't walk well but no one batted an eye; they just dragged her.

It was then that I realized how badly they mistreated the French people and that we were in great danger.

When we reached the bottom of the endless stairs, I got tired and started going slowly. The guard that was guiding me gave me a sharp poke in the ribs and we continued going.

After many more long dark hallways, we reached two adjacent, empty cells and were roughly shoved into them. Monsieur Moyenne pulled out a sharp key and the lock ground shut. I raced to the doors and pounded until my fingers were raw and bleeding and my voice was hoarse from screaming.

Then I succumbed to the tears and curled up in a ball on the floor. When there were no more tears, no more hope, no more anything, I prayed.

I opened my eyes and groaned. My back ached from the cold, hard floor and my ribs throbbed from being poked and jabbed. There were no windows in the dungeon, so I could not tell how long I had slept.

“Ida?” My voice was cracked and dry from screaming.

“What is going to happen to us?” Her voice trembled as she spoke.

I put my big sister demeanour on and soothed her.

“I don’t know, cherie, but everything will be alright and we will be together.”

When I finally believed that myself, I heard something that made my blood turn to ice.

Footsteps. The sound of shoes click-clacked down the echoing hallway. I could tell the person was holding a torch.

Not yet. I wasn’t ready yet.

After a few long seconds, the person came into view and started jogging. I was surprised. The guards always walked like they had all of the time in the world and they were the best of everybody. Then I could see the person’s face.

“Certainement pas!” I exclaimed. “Ma!” I was right. My mother took a key from her belt and unlocked my door as well as Ida’s. I hugged her, crying tears of joy.

“How, Ma, how did you obtain the keys?” I asked after a few moments when I could speak again.

“He did it.” Ma choked out. “We did it. LaFontaine and Baldwin. He convinced Sydenham. Last night.” She couldn’t say anymore but her face said it all. We convinced the British!

Epilogue:

The next few weeks were a blur of ecstasy. I was allowed to be with my family and from them I learned everything that had happened.

The night we had been waiting for came to life. The Reformers of Canada had convinced the British government that having French people in the government and treating all of us equally was the better decision. I was already beginning to hear French people speak their mother tongue freely and practice Catholicism and customs from France without hiding it.

A partially new government was formed with Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine at its head and with many French citizens present in it. The Province of Canada was already taking a turn for the better and basically everybody was content.

Together we fought and now responsible government and peace throughout the people is a reality.

Works Cited

“.” . - *YouTube*, 5 January 2023, <https://school.eb.com/levels/high/article/Sir->

Louis-Hippolyte-LaFontaine-Baronet/46821. Accessed 31 May 2023.

“Canada A Country by Consent: Durham's Report 1839.” *Canada: A Country by Consent*, <https://www.canadahistoryproject.ca/1840/1840-10-durham-report.html>. Accessed 4 May 2023.

Cecillon, Jack, et al. *Emerging Loyalties*. Doug Panasis, 2006.

Eliel, Jillian. “A Day In The Life of a Pioneer Child: Morning Routines,...” *Job Carr Cabin Museum*, <https://www.jobcarmuseum.org/blog/a-day-in-the-life-of-a-pioneer-child-morning-routines-tacoma-in-the-1870s>. Accessed 25 May 2023.

“Lord Durham.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 16 September 2022, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/john-george-lambton-1st-earl-of-durham>. Accessed 5 May 2023.

McClintock, Margaret, et al. *Nelson History 7*. Nelson Education Limited, 2016.

Ouellet, Fernand. “Biography – LAMBTON, JOHN GEORGE, 1st Earl of Durham – Volume VII (1836-1850) – Dictionary of Canadian Biography.” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*,

http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/lambton_john_george_7E.html. Accessed 5 May 2023.