

A Quick History Lesson

The Battle of the Plains of Abraham

*background on the epic poem
touring Canada, April-May 2005
www.plainsofabraham.ca*



AN INITIATIVE OF THE DOMINION INSTITUTE

The Siege of Quebec (1758-1759)

In June 1759, Wolfe arrived at Quebec with his army of English line regiments, Highland regiments, and American irregular troops. Yet the natural defensive advantages of the city – tall cliffs on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River – made it difficult to assault directly. After the first such assault was beaten back at the Battle of Montmorency (31 July), Wolfe fell back on “scorched earth” tactics, hoping to force the French to surrender from hunger. When he himself fell ill, however, it seemed inevitable that the British would be forced to abandon the siege.

Unexpectedly, on the 12th of September, Wolfe learned that a supply convoy was expected by the French, a convoy which would land at a small cove near the citadel, L'Anse-au-Foulon. Impersonating the supply convoy, his leading soldiers – Scottish officers of the 78th Fraser Highlanders, fluent in French – fooled the defenders and opened the way for the rest of the British army to climb the steep cliffs of the north shore and prepare for battle on the fields in front of Quebec: the Plains of Abraham.

The Battle of the Plains of Abraham

On the morning of the 13th of September, Montcalm got word that the British had appeared on the north shore, and he led his forces to battle. Perhaps rashly, he decided to attack them directly, without waiting for reinforcements. His mixed force of French line regiments, the local *Compagnies franches de la Marine*, First Nations allies, and Canadian militia charged the British line in some confusion. The British volleys were slow, deliberate, and deadly, and the French retreated to Quebec in disorder. At the height of the fighting, Wolfe was killed leading a charge, and Montcalm was mortally wounded, dying that night. The British held the field, and Quebec quickly surrendered.

After the Battle

Nevertheless, the war was not over. That winter, the French general Lévis trained more troops in Montreal, marching in the Spring of 1760 to try to retake Quebec. Victorious at the Battle of Ste.-Foy (28 April 1760), Lévis lacked the artillery to assault the citadel, and eventually had to retreat to Montreal. There he was forced to surrender (8 September 1760), more than a year after the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, ending the history of the Seven Years War in North America and the story of New France.

The conquest of New France by the British had a decisive effect on the subsequent history of Canada and of North America. The relatively enlightened policy of reconciliation adopted by the British governors in the years that followed was one of the causes of the American Revolution (1776), which resulted in the creation of the United States and in extensive anglophone settlement in New Brunswick and Ontario. The partnership of the English and French languages in Canada therefore dates from these decades. Without the Battle of the Plains of Abraham and its surrounding events, Canada as we know it today would not exist, and the world itself would look very different.

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The Two Generals Montcalm and Wolfe

Louis-Joseph de **Montcalm** was born at his noble family's house at Candiac, France, in 1712. He entered the army as an officer when he was 12 years old, and was promoted to the rank of colonel at the Siege of Prague (1742). In 1756 he was promoted to major-general and took command of the defense of New France. To everyone's surprise, he initially took the offensive, capturing Fort William Henry and defeating the British at the Battle of Carillon (1758). After a resolute defense of Quebec against all odds, Montcalm was killed at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham (1759) and was buried in the Ursuline Convent at Quebec.

James **Wolfe** was born at Westerham, Kent, England, in 1727, the son of an army officer. He first fought at the Battle of Dettingen (1743), and fought against the Jacobite Rebellion in Scotland in 1745, where on one occasion he refused to shoot the colonel of the Fraser Highlanders, who were later devoted to him for this reason. During the Seven Years War, Wolfe was acclaimed as the "Hero of Louisbourg" for his role in capturing that fortress in 1758. Chosen to lead the expedition against Quebec, Wolfe struggled with sickness for much of the siege, eventually being killed at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham (1759). He was brought back to England for burial.

Homeric Epic Poetry

Epic poetry is a way of telling stories. Instead of speaking freely, however, the epic storyteller speaks in verse, that is to say in rhythmical language. Most cultures around the world have a tradition of epic poetry, usually for telling stories about their history, heroes, and gods. In Western culture, the most famous epic poetry is that of the ancient Greek poet Homer. In his two poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he describes the tragedy of the Trojan War and its aftermath. Homeric poetry was above all poetry intended to be *performed*, or presented to an audience; all aspects of the poet's craft were oriented towards the poem as an *event*. After Homer, however, the tradition of Western literature produced epic poems intended for private reading on the written or printed page. *The Plains of Abraham* thus looks to Homer the storyteller as opposed to the work of other, writing-oriented poets like Virgil or John Milton.

Homer has been an inspiration in more than just the style and orientation of the poem, however. In terms of subject-matter, the Siege of Quebec is rather like the Siege of Troy, for both took place long ago, and in both stories the main characters perish – Achilles and Hector at Troy, Wolfe and Montcalm at Quebec. In terms of technical meter, also, *The Plains of Abraham* uses a type of verse (iambic octameter) which is deliberately meant to resemble the verse of Homer (dactylic hexameter). In the largest sense, just as the *Iliad* helped to give the Greeks a common sense of who they were, *The Plains of Abraham* aims to unite all Canadians in an awareness of the glory, and the tragedy, of their shared ancient history.

For More Information

For more information, please visit the poem's website at www.plainsofabraham.ca. There you will extensive historical, literary, and biographical background on the Plains of Abraham Project, as well as complete scheduling and publicity information for Rhapsodic Tour 2005 (during which the poem is touring Canada from coast to coast, this April and May 2005). Tour coverage includes a regularly updated Tour Blog, Teaching Guides for educators, and a variety of sound and video clips from the ongoing documentary project.