Caste and Clientage in an Eighteenth-Century Quebec Convent

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Captain John Knox was with General James Wolfe's British forces when they made the fateful capture of Quebec in September 1759. Knox was sent to guard the big Hôpital Général outside the town walls and to insure that this institution gave no help to French forces still lurking in the neighbourhood. The captain had a peculiar relationship with a nun who held the office of Superior that year, Mother St Claude de la Croix. On the one hand, he admired the institution she led. It provided identical care to both French and English wounded. Most of the nuns were young and fair. The wards were clean and airy, and each patient had a curtained bed. Knox observed that 'when our poor fellows were ill, and [transferred here] ... from their own odious regimental hospitals ... they were ... rendered inexpressibly happy.'[1] Mother St Claude had personally cared for a young British captain, and she wept when he died. Knox experienced her hospitality first hand when she invited him to a private room to join her for English tea served from a silver pot, treating him to two hours of agreeable conversation at a time when French officers in the Hôpital were shunning him.[2] On the other hand, Knox also perceived the courteous nun as a treacherous schemer, trying to demoralize the British officers under her care. 'Madame de St. Claude,' he wrote, 'is reputed the industrious inventress of ... many ... groundless rumours' of the defeat of Amherst's invading army and other British losses. Knox said he was credibly informed that the British commander, General James Murray, had written her a letter of reproach, chiding her that 'it is his opinion a woman who had shut herself up in a convent and retired from the world, has no right to intermeddle with what passes in it.'[3] Knox said Murray taunted Mother St Claude that 'if she is tired of living out of the world, and will change her habit for that of a man, she being of a proper stature, his Excellency will inroll [sic] her as a grenadier.'[4]

These glimpses of Mother St Claude as the colony was falling to the British, as well as a handful of remarks relating to her in convent annals, colonial correspondence, and family documents, supply only scant knowledge of this figure. But the information we possess is consistent with her position in one of the leading noble families of New France. Her story speaks for many, because a large number of sisters had an elite

1 Captain John Knox, *An Historical Journal of the Campaign in North America for the Years 1757, 1758, 1759 and 1760*, ed. A.G. Doughty (Toronto: Champlain Society 1914), 2: 213. The chief primary documents for this article are the official colonial correspondence at the National Archives of Canada (NA), MG 1, series C11A, and also MG 18, H54, the Ramezay Family Papers. Also invaluable are the annals of the Hôpital Général, much of them printed verbatim in the nineteenth-century edition of [Hélena O'Reilly], *Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier et l'Hôpital général de Québec* (Quebec: C. Darveau, 1882). My thanks to Soeur Juliette Cloutier, the archivist of the Hôpital Général, who supplied me with documents relating specifically to Mother St Claude de la Croix. Micheline D'Allaire's *L'Hôpital-général de Québec, 1692–1764* (Montreal: Fides 1977) is the definitive history, based on exhaustive combing and sophisticated qualitative and quantitative analysis of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century records in the Hôpital archives. Unless otherwise attributed, most details on Hôpital possessions, procedures, and personnel are drawn from D'Allaire's book.

2 Knox, *Historical Journal*, 2: 237

3 Ibid., 368

4 Ibid. This story is repeated, with additional details of Mother St Claude's rumours, in [O'Reilly], *Mgr. de Saint-Vallier*, 393–4. Doughty notes in Knox's *Journal* that Murray's subsequent goodwill to the Hôpital made him 'unwilling to believe
that Murray had any knowledge of the letter attributed to him by the author. Possibly it was mere gossip circulated in the camp.' *An Historical Journal*, Knox, 367–8 note. D'Allaire, however, accepted the story as true in her biography of Mother St Claude for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1974), 544. Marcel Trudel, without dismissing Doughty's doubts, notes that the officer Malartic reported in June 1760, without specifying the reason, that Murray was annoyed with the nuns. M. Trudel, *L'Église canadienne sous le régime militaire, 1759–1764*, vol. 2 (Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires Laval 1957), 294. Though Knox identified Mother St Claude as superior that autumn, another superior had been elected to replace her in May 1759.

background.[5] Though they were fiercely loyal to France, they possessed skills that would help convents avert disaster when conquered by a Protestant nation.

Nuns' powers were real. Jo Ann MacNamara entitled her history of nuns *Sisters in Arms* because 'they have always been in the forefront of religion's battles. They shared the prejudices, the will to domination ... sisters have been united in a long war not only against the enemies of their religion, but also against the misogynist elements within that religion.'[6] Canadian historian Terrence Crowley wrote that 'the prominent role played by Roman Catholic women in French colonial life contrasted sharply with the situation in British possessions to the south ... The freedoms that religious life afforded ... allowed them to make a vital contribution to colonial development.'[7] Marguerite Jean, who made a detailed study of the conflicts between bishops and convents in New France, concluded that several of the latter successfully resisted the 'intransigent wills' of bishops to alter their rules or their mission.[8] What was the source of such authority? An examination of New France's ranked society, with its highly privileged Second Estate, can help answer the question.[9]

It is enlightening to compare the two phases of Mother St Claude's life. As a child she lived in the Norman-style Château de Ramezay, with its four chimneys and massive stone walls, the estate from which her father governed the town between 1704 and 1724. The second phase began when she entered the novitiate of the Hôpital Général de Québec at the age of nineteen. The more one observes her convent surroundings, the more they appear to match the chateau culture into which she was born. In both convent and chateau, a woman could be economically and politically active without loss of caste.[10] Authority sprang not from gender but from noble status and the attendant command of people and resources. Writers on *ancien régime* clienteles point out spousal connections and discuss the occasional woman as an active agent. Even nuns, who receive little mention in the literature on clientage, would seem to be candidates for inclusion, for the convent cases that began to come before French Parlements in the eighteenth century required powerful protectors in addition to legal counsel. This article contributes to scholarship on clienteles by showing how the system penetrated the walls of convents.[11]

To include a cloister in the political process is consistent with a new school of writing about Renaissance and *ancien régime* government. It acknowledges that the formal, abstract state, based on an ideal of impersonal public service, is a modern construction. Unofficial groups, noble and clerical factions, and family connections have sometimes been viewed as private, illegitimate interferences with proper government. Historians now conceive them as the very essence of the pre-modern state, which did not, Julius Kirchner

5 Religious vocations were related to caste. Nobility passed down from father to son, but daughters would lose noble status if they married non-nobles. Unfortunately there were not enough noble grooms to go around. Colonial officers often died young, and those who joined the French army frequently married abroad. Eighteen per cent of noblewomen entered religion, compared with 6 per cent of noblemen. Nearly half the Hôpital nuns entered the convent at sixteen or younger. Judging by several accounts of aspirants renouncing beaus and dancing to go out and care for the poor, and who had to overcome parental objections, many who took the vow deeply desired it. But the move could also serve family interests by forestalling marriage to a commoner.

6 Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1996), ix–x

7 Terrence Crowley, 'Women, Religion and Freedom in New France,' in Larry Eldridge, ed., *Women and Freedom in Early America* (New York: New York University Press 1997), 110–11

8 Marguerite Jean, *Évolution des communautés religieuses de femmes au Canada de 1639 à nos jours* (Montreal: Fides 1977), 199

9 On the ranked society, see Dale Miquelon, *New France, 1701–1744, 'A Supplement to Europe'* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart 1987), 228ff, and Peter Moogk, *La Nouvelle France: The Making of French Canada* (East Lansing: University of Michigan Press 2000), chaps. 6–7. On the 'caste system,' see William Eccles, 'The Social, Economic and Political Significance of the Military Establishment in New France,' in Eccles, *Essays on New France* (Toronto: Oxford 1987), 115–16.

10 Laywomen's activities are signalled in Guy Frégault, 'Politique et politiciens,' in his *Le XVIIIe siècle canadien* (Montreal: Éditions HMH 1968), 159–241. They are the focus of Anka Muhlstein's *La femme soleil: les femmes et le pouvoir* (Paris: Denoel/ Gonthier 1976); of Sharon Kettering, 'The Patronage Power of Early Modern French Noblewomen,' *Historical Journal* 32 (1989), 817–41; and Sara Chapman, 'Patronage as Family Economy: The Role of Women in the Patron-Client Network of the Phélypeaux de Pontchartrain Family, 1670–1715,' *French Historical Studies* 24, 1 (2001): 9 ff. See also my 'Women of the New France Noblesse,' in Eldridge, *Women and Freedom*, 26–43.

11 On convents and parlements, see Mita Choudhury, 'Despotic Habits: The Critique of Power and Its Abuses in an Eighteenth Century Convent,' *French Historical Studies* 23, 1 (2000): 35, 50. On the powers of Tridentine Mother Superiors, see Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect before Her* (London: Fontana 1997), 370 ff.

asserts, acquire 'its celebrated modern impersonality' until the eighteenth century.'[12] There is, according to Giorgio Chittolini, 'a growing conviction that a history of the state conceived as a history of public structures of governance, tidily planned institutions, hierarchies of power, and actions of magistrates and officials cannot adequately describe the ... dynamics' at work. A state functioning in the name of abstract sovereignty and public interest above any 'private' purposes and forces, Chittolini observes, 'simply did not exist.'[13]

Government can be conceived as a vast constellation of groups, large and small, using noble patrons to advance their interests in ruling circles. Colonial historian Peter Moogk believes that, in New France, real power lay with 'high appointees from France who each built up a following from members of different families,' to the extent that one official exclaimed, 'be a relative or a friend of one of the members of high society and your fortune is made!'[14] Still, clientage systems connected 'high society' to the populace. Colonial clientage, S.J.R. Noel observes, constituted a broad strand of government 'woven into the the total fabric of the community,' with an effectiveness 'all the greater because it was not exclusively political.'[15] Even in the continental absolutist state, clientage systems offered a flexibility that created areas of 'choice and voluntarism in French political life.'[16] One example of such flexibility was the bargaining power convents possessed, regardless of their exclusion from formal political structures.

It should be noted at the outset that analyzing a colonial convent's place in noble clientage systems can only partially explain the influence of convents in New France. Indeed, there were several respected convents that had few nobles in their ranks, although all had some. Another article could, with equal pertinence, analyze spiritual sources of convent authority. As in early New England, the colony's highly religious origins offered a certain latitude to saints of both sexes,[17] and the heroic piety of mystics such as Marie de l'Incarnation earned respect. It is also important to recognize that the religious and the secular were thoroughly intertwined, that even the most combative or power-seeking nun likely believed successful appeal to the Crown would allow her better to serve God and his people. In soliciting the Crown she was not appealing to a 'secular' ruler, but one viewed in Christian doctrine as upholding a divine covenant with the ruled. However, this study leaves aside religious dimensions of the sisters' work to concentrate on their politics. It examines the noble status so many nuns possessed, and the way it opened doors for them. This analysis of convent authority centres on two interrelated concepts, caste and clientage.

NOBLES AND 'CASTE'

To be a noble, according to Lorraine Gadoury's study of the 181 noble families of New France, one needed to meet three minimum requirements. First, there had to be documentary proof, such as registered letters of nobility, marriage certificates, or other documents identifying ancestors by noble titles such as *écuyer* (esquire) or *chevalier* (knight). Documents prove that Mother St Claude's family was noble as far back as 1532; they had a coat of arms and passed muster with the intendant of Paris that they 'issued from noble race.'[18] Particularly before 1760 the term 'race' was frequently used to denote the *ancien régime* nobility. Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret identified the belief in eighteenth-century

12 Julius Kirchner, '"Introduction: The State Is 'Back In,"' *Journal of Modern History* 67 (supplement) (Dec. 1995): 1

13 Giorgio Chittolini, 'The "Private," the "Public," the State,' *Journal of Modern History* 67 (supplement) (Dec. 1995): 42–3. Well before this wave of writing on the modern state, John Bosher drew attention to the phenomenon in New France. Bosher, 'Government and Private Interests in New France,' *Canadian Public Administration*, 10 (1967), 244–57.

14 Moogk, *La Nouvelle France: The Making of French Canada*, 184

15 S.J.R. Noel, *Patrons, Clients, Brokers: Ontario Society and Politics, 1791–1896* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1990), 14

16 Sharon Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986), 11

17 Elaine Forman Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports and Social Change, 1630–1800* (Boston: Northeastern University Press 1998), 62–97. While not presenting women (except Quakers) in positions of authority, Crane argues that seventeenth-century Protestant congregations gave women more latitude in church meetings, voting, and public speaking than eighteenth-century congregations did. Salem's first church in the 1630s even allowed women to prophesy. On Catholic latitude as it related to saintliness, see Dominique Deslandres, 'La saintété à l'ombre des cloîtres: Quelques observations sur les représéntations de la sainteté feminine en Nouvelle-France,' paper presented at the conference Colonial Saints: Hagiography and the Cult of Saints in the Americas, 1500–1800, University College, University of Toronto, May 2000.

18 Ramezay Family Papers, Documents 1709ff, 1 June 1701, Jean Phélypeaux to Claude Ramezay, Certification of Nobility

France that nobility conferred 'superiorité séminale ... l'affirmation d'une excellence biologiquement transmise.'[19] In contrast to bourgeois honour, which accrued to the individual, noble honour attached to the lineage. Nobles were seen as a race apart, with separate rules, laws, and customs that made them almost a caste. Along with written pedigree, there were two other criteria of nobility that called for distinctive behaviour. The requirement to 'live nobly' meant that nobles had to avoid manual labour. They could not have commerce as a vocation, though it might be an avocation, subordinated to administrative or military duties.[20] Avoiding toil and money grubbing distinguished the noble from the *villein*, or vile person, the commoner. The other behaviourial requirement was to 'servir le Roi,' to serve the king in some capacity such as bearing arms, performing ceremonial duties, or civil or church administration. Sending generation after generation of its sons into the military, the nobility in New France comprised a group whom historians William Eccles and Dale Miquelon likened to a hereditary caste.[21] Its founding pool of 181 nobles intermarried to the extent that, within a few generations, they were nearly all related.

The family life of Mother St Claude illustrates what noble performance entailed. Born in 1697, she was baptized Marie-Charlotte de Ramezay. Her home had orchards, gardens, and fields that stretched down to the St Lawrence. Her father claimed that their house was 'unquestionably the most beautiful in Canada.'[22] Inside, visitors found the typical features of Canadian chateaux: coats of arms, tapestries, gold-framed mirrors, and handsome furniture. Chateaux also offered the rare sight – in a colony where most were illiterate – of a few books and a writing desk.[23] This was a life of privilege.

The people who assembled there were distinct in their dress and even in the way they moved. Their attire included powdered wigs, floral brocades, velvet and lace garments, and silk stockings that nobles of both sexes wore by prerogative. Another trademark, more difficult to usurp, was their physical grace, developed from childhood. Little French nobles learned how to bow precisely the appropriate degree to persons of varying rank. Youths learned to ride and dance with style. On the day she replaced her ornate gowns with the plain black-and-white habit of the Augustinian nuns, Marie-Charlotte de Ramezay would not shed that noble demeanour, that almost physical sense of superiority.[24]

NOBLES AND CLIENTAGE

Patron-client relationships were usually based on face-to-face contact and reciprocal exchanges. Often they involved material benefits such as land or employment in return for loyalty. A person could be both client to someone higher and patron to those below. Typically these were voluntary, vertical alliances between people of unequal status. The language of both master-servant and affectionate friendship was used. The bonds were often emotional, and were frequently strengthened by kin or marriage ties. Patron-client bonds existed over a period of time, involving informal and ongoing bargaining and negotiation.[25]

Sometimes patron-client relations were not face

19 Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *La noblesse au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Hachette 1976), 53, 70. These racial notions are also discussed in Jonathan Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture: France, 1570–1715* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993), 127, 206. Pride in lineage was seen in the tendency of noble nuns to select the name of a parent as a name in religion. Mother St Claude assumed her father's first name.

20 Lorraine Gadoury, *La noblesse de Nouvelle-France: familles et alliances* (Lasalle, QC: Hurtubise HMH 1991), 15–20, 25 n38

21 Eccles, 'Significance of the Military,' 115–16; Miquelon, *New France*, 240, 242

22 *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 2: 546

23 See, for example, the inventory of the Château St Louis *in Rapport de l'archivist de la Province de Québec, 1922–3* [*RAPQ*] (Quebec: Archives nationales du Québec 1924). Other works casting light on aristocratic material culture include the catalogue *Château Ramezay* (Montreal: Société d'archéologie et de numismatique 1984); Yves Landry, dir., *Pour le Christ et le roi: La vie au temps des premiers Montréalais* (Montreal: Libre expression 1992); Ernest Gagnon, *Le Fort et le Château Saint-Louis* (Quebec 1895); John Hare et al., *Histoire de la ville de Quebec* (Montreal: Boréal 1987); and Monique Eleb-Vidal with Anne Debarre-Blanchard, *Architectures de la vie privée: maisons et mentalités, XVIIe–XIXe siècles* (Bruxelles: Archives d'architecture moderne 1995).

24 The significance of physical grace is discussed in M. Motley, *Becoming a French Aristocrat* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1990), 57–8, 140–9. La Potherie noted, as did many other observers, that Canadian elites were passionately fond of dancing. A contemporary indication of the rigid social segregation of the military noblesse is that, in Quebec City, this group was reported to have attended dinner parties separate from those of administrators and bourgeoisie. C.-C. Le Roy de Bacqueville de La Potherie, *Histoire de l'Amérique septentrionale* (Paris: Nyon 1753), 1: 278–9.

25 Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients*, 38. She fills out her definition on pages 3–15.

to face, but mediated by brokers. In France, brokers used various kinds of patronage to attach provincial nobles and institutions, particularly those in the peripheral provinces, to the throne.[26] Since weather and distance severed communications between colony and mother country for seven months each year, the governor, intendant, and bishop often had to make their own decisions while awaiting court instructions, and the court, in turn, relied heavily on their advice. They all played the broker's role. Intendants appear often in the clientage literature as leading brokers for the Crown. Typically they had personal ties to the court, being what Roland Mousnier termed *fidèles* of the Crown. Many intendants sprang from great families, giving them another attribute of brokers, an independent power base. It is an indication of the importance of family ties that all but one of the fifteen intendants who arrived in New France were relatives or protegés of two French ministerial families, the Colberts and the Phélypeaux. When Jérome Phélypeaux's relative François de Beauharnois arrived as intendant in 1702, a priest at the Quebec seminary observed to a colleague, 'He is related to the minister ... and no one dares say anything.'[27] His brother would later arrive as governor, becoming a familiar visitor and patron of the Hôpital Général. Because of his powerful ties and his independent resources, the broker actively influenced negotiations. According to Sharon Kettering's model, a broker's essential resources were people he knew who could 'provide access to power and place in return for loyalty and service.'[28]

In a colony where bishops were often absent, the Crown controlled basic aspects of colonial convent life such as dowries, number of recruits, and decisions about expansion. Convents needed to find powerful friends, to use their status and connections to ingratiate themselves with governing officials. Though this article focuses on activities in Quebec City, the Hôpital Général was clearly part of a chain that extended upward, for it had a procurer at Versailles. In return, the nuns offered the reciprocal loyalty and service at the heart of the patron-client relationship. They were agents of state social control. They housed beggars, prostitutes, and the insane as well as the elderly and disabled. During epidemics they served as a quarantine station for soldiers and sailors from the king's ships. They also performed other services for their patrons, such as accepting as postulants or boarders protegées of the governor, intendant, and minister of marine. This was indeed a reciprocal arrangement, with nuns providing loyal service in exchange for protection by the mighty in Quebec and at Versailles.

Such practices came naturally to the noblesse. Certainly in the home where Mother St Claude was born, building clienteles had always been part of everyday family life. In order 'to display the wealth that promised generosity to his clients ... a great noble needed to maintain a large household.'[29] As best he could, her father pursued that strategy. He purchased the modest office of governor of Trois-Rivières and proceeded to build a splendid estate to host dignitaries who passed through the village. A French aristocrat's style was to be constantly on show, 'forever courting the public opinion ... [of other nobles] so that they may pronounce him worthy.'[30] Claude de Ramezay won Governor Frontenac's accolade as 'a real gentleman.'[31] Promotion to the Montreal post and the building of the famous chateau followed. The governor's modest salary meant he was soon imploring the Crown for subsidies, the governorship requiring 'much expense to sustain ... with honour.'[32]

To consolidate their position, the family opened their chateau to frequent visits from Madame de Ramezay's powerful kin, the governor's military cronies, and all kinds of official visitors to Montreal. Beds of assorted sizes were typically scattered about in most of the interconnecting rooms, even the kitchens and vestibules. In those days servants often slept beside their masters. Truly private space was reduced to the space inside the bedcurtains when they were closed.

Seeking Crown patronage to finance their

26 Ibid., 9. Noel, *Patrons, Clients, Brokers*, 71, notes the importance of brokers on in the pioneer province of Upper Canada in integrating local leaders to the centre.

27 *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 3: 51

28 Sharon Kettering, 'The Historical Development of Political Clientelism,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, 3 (1988): 425–6. Kettering asserts that both she and Mousnier share the view of the French government 'retaining clientelist characteristics until the Revolution' (422). On the intendants of New France, see Jean-Claude Dubé, 'Clients des Colbert et des Pontchartrain à l'Intendence de Québec,' in Yves Durand, dir., *Hommage à Roland Mousnier: clientèles et fidélités en Europe à l'époque moderne* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France 1981), 205–12.

29 Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients*, 34

30 J. Péristiany makes this point in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London: Weidenfeld 1965), 11.

31 P.-G. Roy, *La Famille de Ramezay* (Levis: Np, 1910), 7

32 NA, MG 1, C11A, vol. 22, 12 Oct. 1705, Ramezay to the Minister

sociable lifestyle was typical of the colonial noblesse. La Potherie wrote that Canada was a poor country, heavily dependent on Crown gratifications. Lobbying was essential. Officials received petition after petition – and doubtless any number of verbal requests – from Canadian nobles unable to support their families. When Claude de Ramezay died in 1724, Governor Vaudreuil commented that he had served 'with honour ... and lived very comfortably, having always spent more than his salary, which is the reason he has left only a very small estate to his widow and children.'[33] Fortunately his survivors were well connected. Noble youths frequently went to other households to build such connections, and Marie-Charlotte and her sisters had been packed off, as young as the age of five, to the elite Ursuline Convent school in Quebec City, where they met other noble girls and their families. The widow and one of the daughters took over the seigneurial sawmilling operation, and Madame de Ramezay penned the supplications.[34] The colonial officials, who doubtless had savoured the hospitality of her banquets and dances, seconded her appeals. She secured a pension for herself and her daughters, forgiveness of family debts, and a captaincy for her son Nicolas-Roch.

NOBLES AND CROWN SERVICE

Despite their privileges, the nobility did not exist merely to decorate the earth. They served the Crown, often at the cost of their lives. In an underpopulated colony surrounded by enemies, the nobles were expected to lead the defence. The king encouraged this role by awarding the coveted St Louis Cross to officers for outstanding service. Canadian officers were noted for valour and willingness to campaign.[35] They shed their blood for their king not only at Lake Champlain and Labrador but also under the boiling sun in Senegal and Pondicherri. Wives, mothers, even nuns of these warrior families discussed military strategy.[36] Marie-Charlotte's brothers, father, brothers-in-law, cousins, and nephews were all military officers, becoming ensigns as early as the age of six. All four of her brothers served, three dying young. Her brother Roch survived and served for four decades.

The women of the military caste also heard the call to serve the king. They might participate by accompanying the intendant as part of his retinue when he travelled. A few wielded political power directly. Elisabeth de Vaudreuil, wife of an early eighteenth-century governor, ingratiated herself with patrons and clients at Versailles so effectively that Quebec officials complained she controlled all the colonial appointments.[37] It is not surprising that ladies from governing families knew something about statecraft, since the family home in those days was also the seat of government, and constant hosting was a requirement of office. Contemporary terminology recognized the familial responsibility, terming official wives 'La Gouvernante' and 'L'Intendante.' Certainly, Marie-Charlotte and her siblings grew up in the public eye. According to a family story, she and her sister Catherine expressed surprise at seeing their mother setting off pale and tired early one morning for a regimental review. While admitting that this life took its toll, Madame de Ramezay admonished her daughters: 'What would people think of us, if we refused to associate with his Majesty's officers, with high-ranking citizens?' Their response was that their mother had 'more cares than pleasures ... permit your daughters to embrace a state which never offers such vexations.'[38] In the meantime, even the children served the Crown, joining their parents to review

33 Ibid., Vaudreuil and Beauharnois to Maurepas, 2 Oct. 1724; *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 2: 548; V. Morin, 'Les Ramezay et leur château,' *Cahiers des dix*, 3 (1938), 43. For La Potherie's comment, see *RAPQ*, 1926–7, 111–31.

34 See, for example, NA, MG 1, C11A, vol. 50, Mme de Ramezay à Maurepas, 8 Oct. 1728. With regard to boarding school, future estate manager Louise de Ramezay was sent to the Ursulines at the age of five.

35 Louis Franquet, *Voyages et mémoires sur le Canada* (Montreal: Éditions Élysee 1974), 56; La Potherie, *Histoire*, 1: 366–8. See also Eccles, 'Military Establishment.'

36 Mother St Claude informed nuns in France about colonial military strategy, including the size of the forces and the strengths of various forts. Her letter is printed in [O'Reilly], *Mgr Saint-Vallier*, 331–3. Madame de Vaudreuil informed the colonial minister on the different strategies and equipment needed for summer and winter raids in the colony. General Montcalm chastised the wife of the second Governor Vaudreuil for interfering in military councils.

37 Ruette d'Auteuil, 'Mémoire sur l'état présent du Canada,' *RAPQ*, 1922–3, 50. The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* 2: 301–2, contains an excellent compilation of sources on Madame Vaudreuil. Particularly useful discussions of the family are found in Francis Hammang, *The Marquis de Vaudreuil* (Bruges: Université Louvain 1938), and Yves Zoltvany, *Philippe de Rigaud de Vaudreuil* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart 1974), which assess Mme Vaudreuil's influence, 110 and 215, respectively. The key colonial correspondence for Madame Vaudreuil is in NA, MG 1, C11A, vols. 21–49, some of which is printed in *RAPQ*, 1942–3, 1946–7, and *Collection des manuscrits relatifs à la Nouvelle-France* (Quebec: Coté 1883–4), I.

38 Abbé François Daniel, *Histoire des grandes familles françaises du Canada* (Montreal: Senécal 1867), 438–40

troops that day. Continuing this tradition of public service, three of the daughters later offered to nurse the town's sick during a smallpox epidemic. By that time their sister Marie-Charlotte had already entered the convent.

THE CONVENT AND CASTE

Marie-Charlotte chose the Hôpital Général, an institution founded by the aristocratic Bishop Saint-Vallier, who had been a chaplain at Louis XIV's court. The bishop actively recruited noblewomen to his order. He helped pay their dowries and encouraged them to assume convent administration. Hôpital Général historian Micheline D'Allaire calculated that 37–46 per cent of the nuns were noble. By Gadoury's stricter definition, some 22 per cent were noble.[39] Either proportion is high, for only about 3 per cent of the colonial population held this status. Because the elite nuns occupied the more visible positions, visitors perceived nobles as the majority. Charlevoix (1720) wrote that 'most are girls of rank,' Kalm (1749) stated that 'most of them are noble,' and Pascau du Plessis (1756) identified them as 'all girls of rank.'[40]

Despite its purpose to serve the poor, the Hôpital must have conjured up memories of home for Mother St Claude. Visiting the colony in 1720, French historian Charlevoix pronounced the Hôpital Général 'the most beautiful house in Canada.'[41] It overlooked meadows, woods, and a meandering river. As in the Château de Ramezay, private space was scant and public space, grand. The nuns slept in small, unheated cells, struggling to keep warm in blue-curtained beds. The communal rooms were warm and handsome. The church in particular was magnificently adorned, just as Marie-Charlotte's home had been. There were gold and silver fixtures, oak wainscotting, large portraits and landscapes, and fine tapestries. Like the de Ramezays, the nuns put on a fine show. When Swedish botanist Pehr Kalm visited, a large flock of nuns showed him around. They presented a banquet with dishes 'as numerous and various as on the tables of great men,' and Mother St Claude was described as 'the daughter of a Governor ... [having] a very grand air.'[42]

The nuns also duplicated another aspect of the chatelaine's lifestyle: they commanded a multitude. Noble nuns usually held the highest administrative offices. Between 1700 and the colony's end in 1760, the mother superiors were noble more than two-thirds of the time.[43] Nobles often supervised wards, novices, and finances.[44] When Marie-Charlotte de Ramezay became Mother St Claude, she held a number of offices, including that of superior for six years; as depositary, she directed finances for twenty-six.[45]

Inside the convent, Marie-Charlotte encountered the same sharply drawn hierarchies she had known at the Château. Choir nuns and converse sisters inhabited the same convent, but different worlds. Even if they were adolescents, choir nuns were addressed as 'mother.' Choir nuns passed much of their day in prayer, meditation, and song, though they spent some time in the wards and teaching the poor.[46] The converses, in contrast, were typically

39 D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 93, 114, and her *Les dots des religieuses au Canada français, 1639–1800* (Montreal: Hurtubise HMH 1986), 167. D'Allaire's time frames vary. Her 37.2 per cent figure applies to the period 1693–1800, while her 45.9 per cent figure appears to relate to 1700–60. Is it possible that Gadoury, in *La noblesse*, 68, based her lower 22 per cent figure on converses *and* choir nuns, and D'Allaire on the latter alone?

40 P.F.X. de Charlevoix, *Histoire et description générale de la Nouvelle-France* (Paris: Nyon 1744), 3: 78; Peter Kalm, *The America of 1750* (New York: Wilson-Erickson 1937), 454–5; P.-G. Roy, *La ville de Québec sous le régime français* (Quebec 1930), 2: 265. See also Ruette d'Auteuil, 'Mémoire sur l'état de la Nouvelle-France,' *RAPQ*, 1923–4, 6.

41 De Charlevoix, *Histoire et description* 3: 77–8: 'C'est la plus belle Maison du Canada, & elle ne departeroit point nos plus grandes villes de France.' On the Hôpital building, see also Kalm, *The America of 1750*, 454–5; Roy, *La ville de Québec sous le régime français*, 2: 265; d'Auteuil, 'Mémoire sur l'état de la Nouvelle-France,' 6; Knox, *Historical Journal*, 2: 214–15; [O'Reilly], *Mgr St-Vallier*, 331.

42 Kalm, *Travels*, 2: 455. They also had stables, various carriages and sleighs, and both large and small boats. D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 160ff.

43 For sketches of the superiors, see Joseph Trudelle, *Les jubilés et les églises et chapelles de la ville et de la banlieu de Québec, 1608–1901* (Quebec: Le Soleil 1904), 116–19.

44 The Juchereau Duchesnays are an example. They were drawn from a line of warriors so illustrious that one writer remarked that their history resembled a novel, and they included many women who took the veil. Mother Geneviève de St Augustine ruled as superior for a decade. Her younger sister Mother Marie-Joseph de l'Enfant-Jesus became her assistant superior at the age of twenty-one. She ruled for nearly twenty years as superior, and for another twenty in such offices as hospital director, despositary, and *discrète*. Their niece, Mother Marie-Catherine de St Ignace, wrote the annals. P.-G. Roy, *La famille Juchereau Duchesnay* (Lévis: Np, 1903), 1: 178–86, 221

45 *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 3: 544

46 D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 168–9, has a fascinating hour-by-hour description of their routine, which brings out the spiritual side of their existence – a subject deserving

illiterate daughters of the working class. Their dowries were much lower. While sisters wore shoes, they wore clogs. Their bed linen was coarse. Required to be healthy, robust, and docile, converses took care of the barnyard and did the heavy work in the garden, laundry, and stable. These 'Cinderellas of the convents' could not sing in the choir or vote in convent elections. They came to community meetings only to confess their faults.[47]

Choir nuns directed not only the converses but the numerous inhabitants of the institution and its three seigneuries. There were as many as thirteen domestic servants. Hundreds of *habitant* farmers paid dues and homage to their convent seigneuresses. Choir nuns, including Mother St Claude, personally crossed the river to inspect their St Vallier seigneurie. While there, they performed a function typical of dignitaries: they became godparents to new babies, who were then named after them. They also employed carpenters and builders, harvest crews, and male nurses. Though the nuns may have felt deference towards the resident bishop and convalescent military officers, most of their clients were in a subordinate position, outranked by the religious and also dependent upon them.[48]

With all this help, the Hôpital carried out the noble mandate to serve the Crown. The institution was founded, as were a number of hôpitaux généraux in France, in the seventeenth century to deal with a growing number of beggars, prostitutes, petty criminals, and vagabonds. The Quebec Hôpital usually housed some fifty inmates.[49] An hôpital was not a hospital; rather, it combined the functions of workhouse and hospice. Nonetheless, in times when the regular hospital (the Hôtel-Dieu) was full or incapacitated, the Hôpital also served the sick. It filled this role in wartime, and during epidemics in 1756–7, when ten nuns lost their lives caring for stricken soldiers and sailors.[50] The Crown compensated the nuns for these services. Like other faithful clients of the Crown, they continued to serve even when the pay failed to arrive.

The nuns' wealth, like that of the military *noblesse* in general, was based on various sources of income and a good deal of womanly enterprise. Besides Crown and seigneurial revenues, they had two kinds of paying pensioners. Aging women and men often lodged there and some paid through service. One pensioner crossed the river each spring to the St Vallier seigneurie to collect rents for the convent;[51] and a widow whose husband had died at the Hôpital offered to serve as *soeur tourière* (gatekeeper) for life. The nuns also acquired a group of young pensioners when they opened a school in 1725. Noting the lack of milling available for local *habitants*, the nuns erected a huge windmill that became a major source of revenue.[52] Sisters, inmates, or servants busied themselves with farming, dairy, and poultry, churning, preserving, baking, and hunting to supply the table, as well as weaving, sewing, and shoemaking. The nuns ran a pharmacy and performed such feminine arts as filigree embroidery and artificial flower making. Other income came from those who admired the sisters' work. Donations arrived from couples without heirs and from court fines levied on petty offenders. Alms of all kinds arrived in such quantity that they rivalled seigneurial earnings as the largest source of revenue.[53]

The income came from solid service to various clients and patrons. The Hôpital school was renowned;[54] the quality of care in the spotless wards won consistent praise. Women young and old came to count on the Hôpital to house them in widowhood or in wartime.[55] The St Vallier seigneurie was well developed, its windmill serving the government and the farmers for miles around. The operation would become even more vital as

fuller study.

47 There was one exception: converses were allowed to vote on whether the community confessor's term should be extended. Ibid., 152–3. 'Cinderellas of the convents' is Miquelon's phrase.

48 [O'Reilly], *Mgr Saint-Vallier*, 253, discusses godparenting. D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 120–1, lists the population of domestics, pensioners, and ecclesiastics.

49 This estimate is based on D'Allaire's figures, *L'Hôpital-général*, 120–2. Mother St Joseph claimed in 1716 that they cared for more than sixty, a figure higher than any on D'Allaire's chart. NA, MG 1, C11A, vol. 36, Mother St Joseph to Conseil de la Marine, 12 and 14 Nov 1716. For an introduction to the literature and the controversies regarding *hôpitaux* and poor relief in Europe, see M.H.D. van Leeuven, 'Logic of Charity: Poor Relief in Preindustrial Europe,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 24, 4 (1994): 589–613.

50 [O'Reilly], *Mgr Saint-Vallier*, 327–32

51 D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 19, 128

52 NA, MG 1, C11A, vol. 29, 137, Mother Superior to Pontchartrain, 1708. D'Allaire discusses revenue in *L'Hôpital-général*, 39–49.

53 For the couple without heirs, see P.-G. Roy, *Le Vieux Québec* (Quebec: Np, 1922), 109. On alms, see D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 41.

54 P.-G. Roy, *La Ville de Québec sous le régime français* (Quebec: Redempti Paradis 1930), 1: 528

55 D'Allaire attributes the upsurge of postulants in the 1750s to the desire for a safe haven in wartime, a theory also expressed by Bishop Briand. See also Crowley, 'Women, Religion and Freedom,' 121.

both a field hospital and a refugee centre in the French régime's final days. The sisters' varied activities were termed 'indispensable service' by the Crown brokers above them and were much used by the local inhabitants.

THE CONVENT AND CLIENTAGE

It took some time for the nuns to master the art of securing protectors. Bishop St-Vallier's initial decision to found the Hôpital and to staff it with Augustinian nuns from the Hôtel-Dieu was done much against the will of the order, which did not wish to see its forces spread too thin. The bishop overpowered the opposition. He employed the emotionalism that so often characterized patron-client relations; he visited the Hôtel-Dieu and wept to soften their hearts. They cried too, but did not budge. He proceeded to the French court, and there he won his cause. Once the Hôpital was established, the bishop became its powerful protector.

The nuns' powers were put to the test when St-Vallier died in 1727. Infighting among various clerical and lay leaders brought one faction to the doors of the Hôpital, where his body lay. Fearful that his request to be buried at his Hôpital would be countermanded by the other faction, which preferred the cathedral, Mother Superior Geneviève Duchesnay, a noblewoman, permitted the visitors to hold an impromptu midnight service. The poor held the candles, the mass was sung, and the bishop duly buried. When the rival faction discovered this deception, they denied the Hôpital chaplain the right to administer sacraments to the nuns and proceeded to replace Mother Duchesnay as superior.[56] The majority of the sisters rebelled and continued to obey her.

Part of an imbroglio between high officials, this episode was also the first of a series of brushes with ecclesiastics who seem to have detested the nuns. The Quebec sisters were making decisions ordinarily made by men, for Hôpitaux in France were administered by laymen. The clerics seem to have been repelled by the independence of the sisters. In 1730 Bishop Dosquet would accuse them of 'bad conduct' and an abusive 'spirit of independence and liberty,' as he asked the minister to reduce their numbers.[57]

The nuns responded to the coup against Mother Duchesnay by soliciting patrons. In the face of ecclesiastical hostility they could turn to secular rulers, for colonial bishops faced more state control than French ones did.[58] The nuns wrote directly to the colonial minister with their version of events. Mother Duchesnay, in the master-servant language of patronage, 'took the liberty to write to your Lordship to supplicate very respectfully the honour of your protection,' hoping he would apply his 'penetrating mind' to their problem. She noted, in the affectionate language of patronage, of how the minister's kinsman, Governor Charles Beauharnois, like 'a good father full of charity,' had come and restored peace to the convent.[59] Yet she also enclosed, and endorsed as 'simple and truthful,' the memoir of Sister Agnes.

Sister Agnes, in her office of convent secretary, signed her note 'on behalf of the whole community.' She claimed that Governor Beauharnois had himself divided their community, forcing on false pretenses some of the younger or more timid nuns to bow to authority.[60] The governor was evidently a frequent visitor, and he convinced some of the more impressionable sisters only 'after a thousand entreaties.' But Sister Agnes reiterated firmly, twice, that, on behalf of the convent in general, sentiments were ever the same for retention of their chaplain and their rights.[61] The letter shows that in seeking help from the authorities, the nuns were not altogether beholden to them. Particular care was needed, since the governor initially sided with the faction hostile to the Mother Superior. Still, Governor Beauharnois proved to be a friend. He protested against the arbitrary condemnation of Mother Duchesnay and used his authority to have

56 On ecclesiastical infighting and its negative effect on convents, see Henri Tetu, *Les évêques de Québec* (Quebec: N. Hardy 1889), 175–6. On the burial controversy, see also Miquelon, *New France*, 253–4, and Dale Standen, 'Politics, Patronage and the Imperial Interest: Charles Beauharnois's Disputes with Gilles Hocquart,' *Canadian Historical Review* 60, 1: (1979): 19–40.

57 NA, MG 1, C11A, Dosquet to Maurepas, 16 Oct.1730. He also requested that they be returned to the control of the Hôtel-Dieu.

58 D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 135. Fortunately for the convent, its letters patent required concurrence of governor and intendant with the bishop on major changes. On the relatively large powers of the state, see Jean, *Évolution des communautés religieuses*, 201–2, 208. Guy Frégault elucidates the complex relations between church and state in *Le XVIIIe siècle canadien*, 86–158.

59 NA, MG 1, C11A, vol. 50, Geneviève St Augustin Superière à Votre Grandeur, 4 Oct. 1728

60 The false pretenses were that legal proceedings might be taken against the party that had offended them, and that they would be shunned.

61 NA, MG 1, C11A, Soeur Agnes to the Minister, 19 Oct. 1728

the interdiction lifted.

A second imbroglio occurred when Mother Duchesnay died in 1730. The bishop's representative was determined to break the rule of the proud noblewomen at the head of the Hôpital.[62] He arbitrarily appointed a non-noble nun as the superior. This act violated the order's constitution, which called for election by secret ballot. Mother St Claude and seven others retired to their cells during this illegal procedure, taking care first to disable the convent bell.[63]

After inspecting the convent's constitution, Governor Beauharnois (who was related to the Phélypeaux clan) and Intendant Hocquart (who was related to the Colbert clan) both agreed with the nuns. They asked the minister to call for a new election. They added that vexations (*tracasseries*) were common in convents. They insisted that the nuns generally conducted themselves appropriately. They charitably attended invalids and the insane, an 'indispensable service' to the colony. The Crown did not go so far as to remove the appointee, but Mother Duchesnay's younger sister was elected superior in 1732, and for the rest of the time until the Conquest the superior was always a noblewoman. Nor was there further complaint of ecclesiastics interfering in elections.[64] From 1732 onward, according to D'Allaire, the Crown looked with favour on the convent.[65]

D'Allaire also described the nuns as being adroit 'in the way they assured themselves of protection of the powerful.'[66] In their extravagant claim to the dead bishop's palace on the grounds that they were his universal legatees, the nuns lost their case. Yet when Mother Duchesnay wrote to condemn the efforts of the absentee Bishop Mornay to saddle them with the costs of renovating the palace, her words exuded the confidence of the daughter and sister of warriors: 'Isn't it burdensome enough for the ... nuns to have paid ... reparations without taking any benefit from a donation made with such generosity and good faith by M. de St.Vallier! And could not His Majesty, by way of compensation, make M. de Mornay desist from his exorbitant pretensions[?]'[67] The governor and intendant backed her up, informing the minister that the nuns certainly should not be required to meet the bishop's demands.[68] They wrote in glowing terms of the convent's work and supported the sisters' desire to have dowry fees made less prohibitive. By 1737, with friendly advocates in the government, the number of choir nuns would grow to thirty-four, with six converses. Two decades later they would total fifty-five. The convent also succeeded in fending off Crown efforts to saddle it with lay administrators.[69]

Patron-client linkages were generally face to face, making them hard for historians to trace. We know there was an unusual amount of visiting by governors and their wives, along with their retinues of officers and friends. This familiarity violated cloister to the extent that both St Vallier and his successor, Bishop Dosquet, appealed to the court to stop the outrage.[70] The nuns even went to dinner parties at the chateaux of the governor and the intendant.[71] In the decade in which the colony fell, both the appalled Bishop Briand and the delighted

62 Ibid., vol. 54, Beauharnois and Hocquart to the Minister, 15 Jan. and 3 and 6 Oct. 1731. D'Allaire too identifies a spirit of independence as the nuns' foremost trait. *L'Hôpital-général*, 173

63 This information comes from a letter from the Quebec Hôpital which survived in the Augustinian archives at Rennes, cited in D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 176.

64 Jean, *Évolution des communautés réligieuses*, 199, 295, provides the context showing various cases where nuns sometimes won, sometimes lost, disputes with ecclesiastics. In this case the nuns seem to have lost the battle but won the war.

65 D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 135. For supportive letters from governor and intendant, see NA, MG 1, C11A, vol. 57, 1 Oct. 1732, and vol. 107, 26 Oct. 1735 and 6 Oct. 1736.

66 D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 217 (see also 50 and 117)

67 NA, MG 1, C11A, vol. 107, Mother Marie-Joseph Duchesnay to the Minister, 24 Oct. 1737

68 Ibid., Beauharnois and Hocquart to the Minister, 24 Oct. 1737

69 The nuns also benefited from protectors in France. A generous procurer represented them at Versailles and looked after their financial interests, sometimes paying their debts from his own pocket. He also shopped around for the fancy fabrics they loved. Advice and assistance came, too, from the Augustinian convents in France. It appears that the nuns largely controlled their own finances. Bishop St Vallier succeeded the lay administrators in 1698, but he was abroad for some fifteen years of his reign. Major initiatives required approval of court or colonial authorities, but day-to-day decisions were made by the nuns. Mother St Claude's dowry contract (for which I am indebted to Hôpital archivist Soeur Juliette Cloutier for supplying a copy) was signed not only by her father, the bishop, and the mother superior, but by all the choir nuns, indicating their collective involvement. Choir sisters voted on the use of dowry capital.

70 Letters from both ecclesiastics are printed in A. Gosselin, *Mgr de Saint-Vallier et son temps* (Evreux: Imprimerie de l'Eure 1898), 97–102. Governor Philippe Rigaud de Vaudreuil and his wife expressed great affection for the Hôpital's first superior, and Madame de Vaudreuil even brought French medicines to her bedside.

71 NA, MG 1, C11A, vol. 56, Dosquet to Maurepas, 4 Sept. 1731

novelist Frances Brooke agreed that the nuns were very worldly. Brooke characterized their conversation as so polite and animated that one forgot the nun and saw only the lady of distinction. The austere Briand fumed: 'What is one to think of the introduction of the abuse of having one's own money at her disposition [this applying to Mother St. Claude] ... buying her own food ... liquors ... clothes?'[72] He went on to accuse the nuns of talking indiscreetly about sexual scandals, rising late, neglecting prayers and rules of silence, and being libertine in recreation time. These ladies were not letting the veil interfere with the art of cultivating friends in high places, dining and conversing in the style to which they had been born.

What the bishop saw as sin, others saw as accomplishment. Mother St Claude's service as depositary (financial officer) during wartime was lauded in the convent annals. While her vocation made her 'humble, modest and devoted,' she was also 'obliged by her employment to have daily dealings with people of all ranks, she showed herself, by the nobility of her manners and the delicacy of her behaviour, always worthy of her high birth.'[73] True to family form, she distinguished herself as superior by launching a building program.

Along with links to the polite world of colonial government, the nuns also had the reliable network of kin to reinforce their position. Unlike priests, nuns were typically Canadian born. With many relatives in the town's shops and warehouses, Legislative Council seats, and government posts, reciprocal patron-client relationships blossomed. Supplies were purchased and donations arrived from families such as the Soumandes, Hazeurs, and de la Chesnayes, who were related to the superiors.[74] Loans were extended or forgiven, and lands were swapped for services. Officials contributed to dowries for needy noble postulants, while nuns educated officials' daughters and cared for their widows. They taught their own nieces (many of whom also took the veil) and boarded their elderly relatives. Amid so many kin, graduates, and friends, the Hôpital was well fixed to weather what storms might come.

THE FALL OF QUEBEC

The storm that arose in 1759 was one of the most devastating imaginable. Having weathered three years of battle, New France was in an exhausted condition. That year, British-American forces were converging along the invasion routes into the colony. In midsummer, General James Wolfe's army, well supported by the British Navy, sailed up the St Lawrence, ensconced itself on shore opposite Quebec City, and began shelling. One young noble, Mother Sainte-Elizabeth Adhémar de Lantagnac, set up a field hospital right at the scene of skirmish, where, having a sword held to her throat, 'seemed to inspire her with fresh zeal.'[75] Wolfe studied ways to lay siege to the well-fortified city on its lofty cliff. Meanwhile his forces ravaged nearby settlements and continued bombarding the town until most of its buildings were in ruins.

During this siege, the Hôpital Général's suburban location was a godsend. Kin and townspeople came pouring into the building with their belongings. Both the Ursuline and Hôtel-Dieu nuns also fled their crumbling convents and came streaming over the fields, carrying their bedding. Soon every attic, hall, barn, and outbuilding was crammed with refugees, patients, inmates, and nuns. Buildings designed for 120 people would house 800.[76]

On the fateful night of 12 September, Wolfe's troops slipped past French sentries and crept up a path leading to the Plains of Abraham. From their windows the sisters, who customarily rose at four, were among the first to learn of the landing. Taken by surprise, Montcalm rushed out to meet them, without even waiting for nearby reinforcements. One of history's most famous battles was over in less than half an hour, as French forces broke ranks and ran back into the walled town. The nuns

72 She was one of two Hôpital nuns reporting personal funds (215 *livres* in paper money) in 1762. Trudel, *L'Église canadienne*, 2: 307. Trudel also quotes Brooke's letter (302). Briand's 1766 letter (now at the Archives of the Archdiocese of Quebec) is cited, and partially reproduced, in D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 184–5.

73 [O'Reilly], *Mgr Saint-Vallier*, 393

74 On links with the Soumandes, Duchesnays, and Hazeurs, see D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 18, 28, 49, 95, as well as her other study, Micheline D'Allaire, *Les dots des religieuses au Canada français, 1639–1800* (Montreal: Hurtubise HMH 1986), 23–4, and [O'Reilly], *Mgr Saint-Vallier*, 370n. The Levasseur family supplied scuptors, craftsmen and craftswomen, postulants and pensioners. R. Traquair and G.A. Neilson, 'The Architecture of the Hôpital-Général – Quebec,' *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada* 7, 2 (1931), 69. Trudel notes Conquest-era loans from kin such as Mme Boishebert (Mother St Claude's sister) and M. de Lanaudière.

75 P.-G. Roy, *La famille Adhémar de Lantagnac* (Levis: Np, 1908), 21

76 See D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 32ff, and [O'Reilly], *Mgr Saint-Vallier*, 350 ff.

watched in horror from their windows. After the battle, hundreds of French wounded were carried to the Hôpital.[77]

That night the nuns were frightened by the loud knock of a British officer at the door. Upon entering, he declared himself their protector. The nuns had already woven the victors into their network. From the time Wolfe sailed up the river, they had accepted the British wounded who had been captured in various skirmishes.[78] Mother St Claude personally cared for the British officer David Ochterloney and wept when he died. In gratitude for her services, General Wolfe declared that should fortune of arms favour the British side, he would extend his protection to her and to the Hôpital.[79]

When the regrouped French forces returned to fight a second battle at nearby Ste-Foy in April 1760, the boom of cannons shook the Hôpital. The nuns saw brothers, fathers, uncles, and nephews fall and be carried in, nearly 500 men in all. The annalist described the scene: 'It requires another pen than mine to paint the horrors [we saw] ... the cries of the dying and the sorrows of the watchers. Those moments required a force above nature to bear it without dying. We had in our infirmaries seventy-two officers; thirty-three died. One saw nothing but severed arms and legs.'[80]

The sense of caste prevailed even in the face of death. The sisters did not separate patients by nationality but by rank, quartering French and British officers in one wing together. This proximity caused some embarrassment, but the officers attempted the courtesy expected of gentlemen.[81] Mother St Claude, who was superior from 1756 to 1759, was imbued with the same sense of courtesy. More than other nuns, she has left traces of this conduct towards both equals and superiors. She nursed Ochterloney. She took pains to entertain the British officers within her walls, personally hosting Captain Knox. Scarcely a week after her brother, town commander Nicholas-Roch de Ramezay, yielded the starving place to the British, Mother St Claude sent the British officer Monckton some preserves the nuns had made. They were, she wrote, 'eager to present their respects' to His Excellency, to express their deep appreciation for his protection, wishing him health.'[82] Writing to a nun in France, she expressed fear that 'all the world' would shun them. Mother St Claude's concern to maintain connections and supporters had been developed from the time of her childhood at the chateau, and it served her well. The French regime came to a close with the capitulation of Montreal in September 1760. Fortunately for the nuns, it fell into the hands of gentlemanly British officers with a similar sense of honour and of clientage.

Despite sisterly solicitude towards the foe, it is impossible to read the annals of any of the town's three convents without discerning their passionate attachment to the French cause. The nuns chronicled battle after battle, the Ursulines even including dispatches sent to them by General Montcalm himself. The Hôpital, where a full 40 per cent of the choir sisters were daughters of St Louis Cross holders,[83] was no less patriotic. The nuns vigorously protested thefts by the British guard, but accepted with equanimity times when French forces purloined the cattle and grain needed to feed Hôpital patients. They maintained secret communications with General Lévis and helped recovered soldiers rejoin French lines.[84] If Mother St Claude spread false rumours of French victories, it was in keeping with the obvious patriotism of the nuns.

With good connections, the Hôpital weathered the change of empires. For a while its survival was in doubt. It was the hardest hit of any of the colony's seven convents, experiencing deep losses

77 A month later the Hôpital cemetery was full of French dead, and 183 battle victims were still being cared for by the nuns. See H.R. Casgrain, ed., *Lettres de divers particuliers au Chevalier de Lévis* (Quebec: Demers 1895), 16–17.

78 Mother Saint-Henri unbound and hid a British officer about to be tortured by one of France's native allies. [O'Reilly], *Mgr Saint-Vallier*, 615

79 A. Doughty and G.W. Parmalee, *The Siege of Quebec and the Battle of the Plains of Abraham* (Quebec: Dussault and Proulx 1901), 2: 164. Of Wolfe's successor, General Murray, the French commissary Bernier wrote to chevalier de Lévis in October 1759: 'Il paroit vouloir protéger toutes les Maisons des Dames religieuses.' Casgrain, ed., *Lettres de divers particuliers*, 28.

80 [O'Reilly], *Mgr Saint-Vallier*, 360

81 Another nice example of the gentlemanly ethos was General Murray's volunteering to supply the French officers, encamped some distance from the town, with their customary coffee, sugar, wine, and liquors. This hospitality eased the dilemma of the officer Malartic, in charge at the Hôpital, of needing to buy from the British 'sans témoigner beaucoup d'empressement ni avoir l'air d'un acheteur, ce qui ne convient pas à un officier de garde.' Casgrain, ed., *Lettres de divers particuliers*, 220–2.

82 The French original is quoted in Trudel, *L'Église canadienne*, 2: 312. Mother St Claude's letter to France also expressed concern that there would be no new postulants. D'Allaire, *L'Hôpital-général*, 132

83 Trudel, *L'Église canadienne*, 2: 202. The order with the next highest proportion, 6.7 per cent, was the Ursulines.

84 [O'Reilly], *Mgr Saint-Vallier*, 355–8

when French bills of exchange were redeemed at a fraction of their face value. The sisters were also stunned when the king, for the first time, refused to repay the expenses they had incurred as a military hospital in the final years of the war. To meet their debts they were forced to sell their most valuable seigneurie, St Vallier. The new governor of Quebec, James Murray, wrote that the nuns belonged to the best families in Canada, those families being their principal source of subsistence, but that the nobility in general was now plunged into distress.[85]

At this juncture the friendship of the English rulers was crucial. Forgiving any white lies the nuns may have told, Governor Murray donated flour and lard to the Hôpital and paid the expenses of the British patients. After the war, he lobbied both the French and the English governments to make financial concessions to the indebted Hôpital.[86] The British government stepped into the role formerly occupied by France, providing annual grants in return for care of the infirm and the insane. Between 1800 and 1823, these grants amounted to about 20,000 British pounds.[87]

Outside the walls, a new gender order was emerging in the Western world. Segregation by sex would gradually become almost as stringent as the old segregation by rank that preceded it. The revolutionary decades that followed the Conquest were hard on chatelaines, court favourites, and powerful women in general. As women outside the convents faced increasing constraints, the Hôpital Général and other convents continued to provide a range of occupations and administrative positions for talented and strong-minded individuals whom convent annals identify as *femmes fortes*. When the elderly Mother St Claude died in 1767 after a lingering illness, she could rest secure. Neither Victorian prejudices nor twentieth-century secularization would succeed in stifling her order of nuns, who to this day work and worship in the ancient convent.

Having forged their ties to the populace and to the new rulers, Mother St Claude and the other nuns of the military *noblesse* fared better than their brothers. Many of the Canadian officers went to France when the defeated French army was evacuated.[88] With weaker connections than the French officers, the Canadians faced a nasty scapegoating. Governor Vaudreuil was thrown into the Bastille for a time, and Roch de Ramezay faced recriminations for surrendering Quebec. Denied permission to publish documents proving he had done so on the advice of his superiors, de Ramezay was ignored by a court obsessed with the health of Madame de Pompadour. He was reduced to the relative poverty of an 800 *livre* pension, which, true to aristocratic form, he applied towards purchasing silk hose and a stylish wig to keep up his station.[89]

The officers who remained in Canada fared badly too. The Anglo-American merchants who flocked into the colony mocked down-at-the-heels nobles, taunting them as 'the swords.' Philippe Aubert de Gaspé, scion of one of those military families, noted that, to get ahead under the new order, there was a common strategy to bury the family history. Though his uncle had fought at Ste-Foy, 'strange to say, he never mentioned the glorious part he played there at sixteen ... But the truth is that at the time, these things were only spoken of in whispers, for fear of appearing "French and bad subjects," as the English put it.'[90] By contrast, the sisters did not have to bury their talents and their past.

CONCLUSION

When the Seven Years' War broke out in 1756, the sisters at the Hôpital Général de Québec, like their brothers on the battlefields, gave their all to the cause, and many died in the line of duty. Nobles that they were, they conducted themselves in ways that answered both the call of honour and the imperatives of a clientage system. Their mastery of that system is suggested by the triple role history has assigned to Mother St Claude: tearful nurse to dying British officers, lady of high breeding serving them tea, and secret agent working on behalf of the French. Whether her rumoured role as French agent is accurate or apocryphal, it is undeniable that she

85 A. Shortt and A. Doughty, eds., ***Documents relating to the Constitutional History of Canada*** (Ottawa: King's Printer 1914), 2: 54

86 It is indicative of the elite mindset of the time that Murray informed the British government that nothing would be more popular with the inhabitants of the colony than assisting the Hôpital, since the nuns came from the best Canadian families. NA, MG 1, series Q, 2: 367

87 Journal of the Legislative Council of Lower Canada, 1824, Appendix 1, 'Report of the Special Committee for Insane, Foundlings, Sick and Infirm Poor,' 2–3

88 At the urging of their families, two of the Hôpital nuns did emigrate to France. [O'Reilly], ***Mgr Saint-Vallier***, 385

89 Ramezay Family Papers, 11 March 1766; letter from Thouron et frères at La Rochelle to J.-B.-N. Roch de Ramezay at Blaye, letter of M. Latuilière at Bordeaux to J.-B.-N. Roch de Ramezay at Blaye, 19 April 1774

90 Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé, ***A Man of Sentiment: Memoirs, 1786–1871***, trans. Jane Brierley (Montreal: Véhicule 1988), 96

and her sisters supported their own brothers who fought beneath their convent windows. They housed hundreds of French refugees and calmly let French forces pillage their supplies. All the while they cultivated the esteem of the British command, who would soon rule Quebec. When their brothers faced ridicule and exile, the nuns stayed in a colony that continued to appreciate them.

What is the significance of presenting caste and clientage as a source of the nuns' authority? It bolstered the ability of convents to survive the change of empires. Travellers to New France, and the gentlemanly army officers who ruled after the Conquest, repeatedly expressed their admiration for the gentility and generosity of the nuns. Even relatively weak or unskilled convent administrators could rely on a well-developed system, one honed during a variety of imbroglios with ecclesiastics during the French regime. Though none of the other convents had as many nobles as did the Hôpital Général, the five large, long-established ones in Montreal and Quebec all had at least 14 per cent of their recruits from this class.[91] They too could benefit from whatever networks these nuns could command, and they adjusted successfully during a period when both male officers and male clergy faced plummeting numbers and morale.[92]

This study also supports scholarly views of clientage as a pervasive form of power lying outside regular political channels. Here we see that it can be particularly helpful in explaining the control elite women sometimes exerted. Convents with large complements of nobles are one case of interests and societal forces joining clienteles to achieve a certain flexibility and independence within the absolutist state. An ingrained code of honour made even nobles within cloisters desire to serve the Crown – and Crown administrators desire to serve them. This situation is, indeed, 'a transformed public/private dialectic ... a state organisation in which institutions appear more minutely engaged and more fully interactive, deriving from their role a more compelling legitimacy and a greater authority.'[93] Authority flowed through Crown brokers to numerous community-based institutions such as the Hôpital Général de Québec. The Hôpital had hundreds of ties to the local populace, and it had aristocrats at the top who parlayed with governors and ministers. In the centuries that predated our modern, binary notions of public and private, sacred and secular, Mother St Claude and other brides of Christ did not shed the persona of proud and well-connected elites when they knelt to take their vows. That attribute equipped them well for battles with ecclesiastical factions and domineering bishops. Those were workaday problems, and things grew considerably worse when British forces took the town. More than ever, Mother St Claude and her sisters needed the self-confidence of the blueblood, and skill in the noble art of making connections. Through war, pestilence, and the death of an empire, caste and clientage served them well.

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91 Gadoury, *La noblesse*, 68, gives the figures: Quebec Ursulines, 20.7 per cent, Quebec Hôtel-Dieu, 17.2 per cent, Quebec Hôpital-Général, 22.4 per cent. In Montreal, the Hôtel-Dieu had 19 per cent and Congrégation de Notre Dame, 14.6 per cent.

92 Trudel, *L'Église canadienne*, 1: 76ff, documents the difficulties among both parish priests and members of orders. On the declining noblesse, see Murray's remark above and Gadoury's figures, *La noblesse*, 156. From a peak of 3.5 per cent of the Canadian population in 1695–1704, nobles declined steadily. They were 1.3 per cent of population in 1754 and 0.8 per cent in 1764. In absolute terms their numbers dropped from 809 in 1745–9 to 474 in 1765.

93 Chittolini, 'The "Private," the "Public," and the State,' 53