

PORTRAITS... AND WHAT ELSE? ELIZABETH SIMCOE, EARLY IMMIGRATION AND NATIVE LAND

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Working through the theme of immigration, this exhibition examines how a colonial point-of-view can represent a land according to the ideas of colonization and imperial expansion. The work of Elizabeth Simcoe (1762-1850) demonstrates how a British woman representing the 18th century landscape of Upper Canada more than one hundred years before Confederation conformed the land to English picturesque ideals. In so doing, she imposed a distinctly colonial perspective upon the landscape, evidencing the political nature of her activity, especially in the context of her presence in Canada from 1791 to 1796.

Elizabeth Simcoe (née Gwillim) was born in England to a wealthy family. In order to come into her inheritance, she married John Graves Simcoe (1752-1806), a British soldier and colonial administrator.¹ When her husband was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada in 1791, the couple moved and lived there until 1796, bringing two of their younger children and leaving the four older daughters in Wolford, England.² As the circumstances of colonial life particularly favoured the writing of journals,³ Elizabeth Simcoe kept a journal during her five years in Canada, in addition to producing several hundred drawings, as well as a number of maps.⁴ Many of these drawings she would send back to her children who remained in England—much as one would send travel or vacation photographs to friends and family.⁵ Caroline Jordan explains: “[Gentlewomen's] art also circulated in their new [colonial] environs around the immediate family circle and in the wider community, and it was held up for approval to visitors.”⁶ For ladies, drawing was as much a social activity as an artistic one, for “In colonial culture, amateur art was a ‘profoundly social act’; it was the ‘social glue that

women used to hold the extended family together and to keep the family integrated into the wider community.”⁷

Colonial amateur drawing being a social action, it was also inherently a political one. Simcoe's drawings remind us to ask not only what is being drawn but how it is represented, and perhaps most importantly, by whom. Her drawings indicate that drawing the Canadian landscape, as a foreign cultural entity, is both a social and political activity as well as an artistic one.



Elizabeth Simcoe (1790)

Mary Anne Burges (British, 1763-1813)

Watercolour

12 x 15.1 cm

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 2897733

<http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2897733>.

This portrait, representing Elizabeth Simcoe in Welsh dress, was drawn for her by her close friend Mary Anne Burges prior to her departure for Upper Canada. Simcoe produced over 500 drawings and watercolours of the British-controlled province during the five years she spent there with her husband, the Lieutenant-Governor.⁸ Additionally, she also produced an album of drawings on birch bark, which she presented to the King, hoping to persuade him to appoint her husband Governor General of Upper Canada.⁹ Simcoe also kept a diary during her time in Canada, published in 1911, describing life in York (Toronto), as well as exchanges that occurred between First Nations peoples and British officers, including her husband.¹⁰



John Graves Simcoe (1900)

John Wycliffe Lowes Forster (Canadian, 1850-1938)

Oil on canvas. 63.5 x 78.6 cm

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 2895901

http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2895901.

This is a portrait of Elizabeth Simcoe's husband, Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe. The artist, John Wycliffe Lowes Forster, who specialized in portraits of important Canadian leaders, likely copied this portrait of Simcoe from an anonymous one made in 1796.¹¹ His style of dress indicates his high rank as a military figure and colonial administrator.



Paccane, a Miami Chief (1794)

Elizabeth Simcoe (British, 1762 - 1850)

Etching with drypoint on wove paper

6.8 x 9.9 cm

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 2834117 /

<http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2834117>.

Elizabeth Simcoe copied this portrait of a Miami chief from a drawing made by the governor of Detroit, Henry Hamilton (1734-1796). Paccane, whose sister married French-Canadian fur trader and British agent Charles Beaubien, was loyal to the British and accompanied Hamilton on an expedition to the Vincennes colony.¹² As a supporter of the British, Paccane would have been of great importance to British officials, aiding them in fostering good relations with the First Nations peoples and furthering their colonial imperatives. This portrait of the chief, whom Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe met on a trip to America, was sent back to a printmaker in England (none were yet established in Canada) along with another etching of First Nations peoples, where 50 copies were made of each. Possibly a form of propaganda, these images would have been distributed in order to demonstrate her husband's good relations with the Native populations in Upper Canada.¹³ Simcoe forgot to reverse the order of her plate inscription, even though she remembered to reverse each individual letter. The name of the Native chief, Paccane, in the upper right-hand corner of the image appears backwards.¹⁴



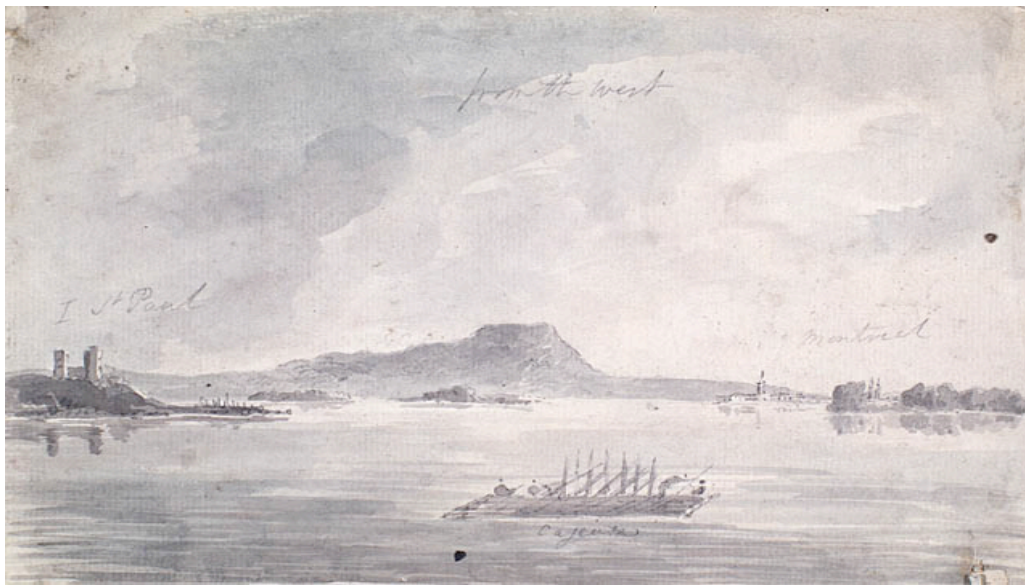
Miami Chief Pacanne (1778). Henry Hamilton (Irish, 1734-1796)

Ink on paper. Dimensions unknown

Henry Hamilton Drawings of North American Scenes and Native Americans (MS Eng 509.2).

Houghton Library, Harvard University.

This drawing by the Lieutenant-Governor of Detroit, Henry Hamilton, of a Native chief named Paccane, is the source from which Simcoe copied her drawing for her etching.



Montreal from the West (1796)

Elizabeth Simcoe (British, 1762 - 1850)

Watercolour

23.5 x 15.2 cm

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 2896568

<http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2896568>.

This watercolour by Elizabeth Simcoe, showing a western view of Montreal in 1796, depicts a colonial presence in the landscape, evidenced by the distinctly European structures that appear as landmarks in the drawing. The identity of the people in the boat in the foreground is ambiguous. Simcoe's landscapes are either depicted occupied by the British, in the process of being settled, or barren and ready to be appropriated, occupied and exploited.¹⁵ While Simcoe claimed that, as a gentlewoman, she did not involve herself in politics—she wrote: “I do not like to ask any questions, as I think it would look impertinent and be as bad as a woman talking politics”—her very act of drawing the landscape of Upper Canada as a woman of British provenance is an inherently political one, especially since she erases an Aboriginal presence from her representations.¹⁶ With the advent of landscape drawing as a polite art in the 18th century, writings about the drawing of picturesque scenes became popular. Among them was William Gilpin's well-known *Observations on the River Wye... Relative Chiefly to Picturesque* (1782), which establishes the qualities of the picturesque landscape, and advocates a general aesthetic that favours imaginary scenes.¹⁷ This mode of landscape drawing grounded in views of rustic rural England rarely included human subjects. Not only was Simcoe constructing the Canadian landscape from a colonial viewpoint, but by following Gilpin's guidelines of landscape drawing, the very style in which she was working further excluded the depiction of the Aboriginal within the landscape.



Landscape, a River Between Hills (c. 1790)

William Gilpin (British, 1724-1804)

Pencil, watercolour and pen and ink on paper

Dimensions unknown

Tate London

<http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=22925>.

This watercolour, drawn by William Gilpin, displays the qualities of the picturesque landscape as he lays them out in his 1782 book. The similarities between his and Simcoe's work are noticeable, particularly in the washes of colour that form the sky, and in the simplified representations of people, composed but with a few daubs of the brush. Simcoe was probably aware of his work directly, or of the work of the many other amateur artists trained to draw this way.



Huts Near The Landing (Queenston) from the Opposite Side of the Niagara River (1793)

Elizabeth Simcoe (British, 1762 - 1850)

Watercolour

18.4 x 11.6 cm

Library and Archives Canada / MIKAN 2896708

<http://collectionscanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayEcopies&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2896708>.

Sent by the British government to encourage American Loyalists to emigrate to Upper Canada by offering large land grants, Elizabeth Simcoe's husband hosted talks with Aboriginal negotiators at Niagara, in order to determine which parts of the land would be left unsettled and remain in Native possession.¹⁸ Once again, Simcoe does not represent a Native presence in the landscape, placing instead colonial homes in a picturesque landscape that mirrors the British countryside, recalling its owners. This drawing of a highly politicized landscape evidences the fact that landscape drawing was not just a benign pastime, but also an activity with social and political implications. As Ann Bermingham writes, "The period's popularization of landscape sketching not only legitimated drawing as a social practice but transformed it for some into a powerful expressive tool."¹⁹



Chippenawan Indians of Carganawagana (c.1790-1800)

Elizabeth Simcoe

Watercolour

12.5 x 15.7 cm

McCord Museum / M2125

<http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/M2125>.

This drawing of three members of the Chippenawan First Nations, among the very few produced by Simcoe, demonstrates that Aboriginals, when drawn by Simcoe, are landless. Furthermore, this is a generalized portrait, focusing more on their attire and adornments instead of their individual identities.



Sketch of Upper Canada (1793)

Elizabeth Simcoe (British, 1762 - 1850)

Cartographic material

19 x 28 cm

Library and Archives Canada / [R12567-123-1-E](#)

<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=4170216>.

In addition to landscape drawing, “civilian mapping of towns and counties, estate maps, and increasingly, after mid-century, maps of enclosures” became a popular part of 18th century draughtsmanship.²⁰ This map drawn by Elizabeth Simcoe shows proposed towns and military roads in Upper Canada, which would have accompanied an official report sent by her husband, the Lieutenant-Governor, back to England for approval.²¹ In addition to her landscape drawing, the map is another example of the colonial perspective and imperative imposed upon the landscape, especially since it depicts proposed roads and towns, and changes of existing names of places and landmarks to emphasize the British ownership. For example, Toronto was initially changed to York, the surname of friends of the Simcoes.²² In such maps, Simcoe is erasing the presence of the Native peoples, while inscribing a new order upon the landscape, in the image of the colonial ideal.

NOTES

- 1 "John Graves Simcoe," *Biographies and Reference*, Canada in the Making, 27 Nov. 2011
<http://www.canadiana.ca/citm/reference/biographies_e.html#simcoe>.
- 2 Denis Longchamps, interview by author, Concordia University, 21 Nov. 2011. Include here the dissertation and journal article by Longchamps on Simcoe.
- 3 Susan Jackel and Shirley Neuman, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, "Autobiographical Writing in English," 27 Nov. 2011 <<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0000405>>.
- 4 "Elizabeth Simcoe," Canadian Women Artists History Initiative, 9 Feb. 2011
<<http://cwahi.concordia.ca/sources/artists/nameSearch.php?artist=simcoe>>.
- 5 Longchamps.
- 6 Caroline Jordan, *Picturesque Pursuits: Colonial Women Artists and the Amateur Tradition*, Victoria: Melbourne University Press (2005): 94.
- 7 Jordan, 94.
- 8 "Elizabeth Simcoe."
- 9 Longchamps.
- 10 "Elizabeth Simcoe."
- 11 Robert Stacy, "John Wycliffe Lowes Forster," *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Historica-Dominion Institute), <<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0002920>>. *Portrait of Lieutenant General John Graves Simcoe (1752-1806)* (About 1796), Anonymous, McCord Museum/ M966.136 <<http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/collection/artifacts/M966.136>>.
- 12 Bradley J. Birzer, "French Imperial Remnants on the Middle Ground: The Strange Case of August de la Balme and Charles Beaubien," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 93:2 (Summer 2000): 140. Bernard W. Sheehan, "'The Famous Hair Buyer General': Henry Hamilton, George Rogers Clark, and the American Indian," *Indiana Magazine of History* 79:1 (March 1983): 8.
- 13 Longchamps.
- 14 "Paccane, a Miami Chief," Library and Archives Canada (19 Mar. 2008)
<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2834117&back_url=%28%29>.
- 15 Longchamps.
- 16 Edith G. Firth, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, "Gwillim, Elizabeth Posthuma," (2000) 27 Nov. 2011
<<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=37540>>.
- 17 Ann Bermingham, *Learning to Draw: Studies in the Cultural History of a Polite and Useful Art*, New Haven: Yale University Press (2000): 94-5.
- 18 Eric Miller, "Chateaubriand and Simcoe at Niagara Falls," *The Antigonish Review* (2011)
<http://www.antigonishreview.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=215&Itemid=65>.
- 19 Bermingham, 126.
- 20 Bermingham, 80.
- 21 "Sketch of Upper Canada by Elizabeth P. Simcoe," Library and Archives Canada (19 Mar. 2008) 27 Nov. 2011
<http://collectionsCanada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=4170216&rec_nbr_list=4170216,4138484,4130758,20379>.
- 22 Longchamps.

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LESSON PLAN

The lesson plan developed in conjunction with this presentation is geared towards high school history students. To offer an alternate, engaging angle on Canadian history, the students will draw a picture of what they think is the iconic image of our country's landscape. We will then take some time to share every student's drawing, having them explain what they drew and why. This will provide a good segue into an explanation of how seemingly banal elements of an artwork can in fact carry strong symbolic values and express hidden agendas. As a class, we will then look at some of Simcoe's drawings and see what symbols and meanings we can derive based on the historical, cultural and social contexts.