

THE MONTREAL RIOT OF 1849

JOSEPHINE FOSTER

THIS eye-witness account of the disorders in Montreal following Lord Elgin's assent to the Rebellion Losses Bill was written by the Reverend William Rufus Seaver, a Congregational minister who supplemented his income by keeping a shop in the city. Born in Montreal on July 11, 1822, the son of Heman Seaver and Sarah Carzneau Seaver, Mr. Seaver was a relatively young man in 1849. When he was twenty he had married Mehitable Homer and by 1849 they had three children. A fourth was born in 1856.¹ At the time this letter was written, Mrs. Seaver was visiting her home in Brimfield, Massachusetts, while her husband stayed in Montreal to attend to an auction held prior to their moving to another house. The family moved frequently, both in Canada and in the United States.²

The minister was apparently a fairly well educated man, as illustrated by his vocabulary and his relatively good spelling. As an onlooker, Seaver reported in glowing journalistic style the events of the riot. He was quite accurate in most of his narrative, but at some points reasons for doubt arise; for example: the wrecking of the *Pilot* office occurred just before the firing of Parliament House,³ but Seaver seems to place it the next night; Professor D. G. Creighton states that the fire in the parliament buildings was started in the piles of stationery,⁴ while Seaver asserts that it began in the gas pipes. Nevertheless his account of the riot has all the fresh and colourful interest of an eye-witness report.

William Rufus Seaver was the great-grandfather of Mrs. Murray C. Flynn (*née* Seaver) of Montevallo, Alabama, and it is through her courtesy that this letter is being published.

Montreal April 25th 1849

MY DEAR WIFE,

I'll attempt to give you an account of what I am doing and what other people are doing for great things have been talked of to day. I begin by saying

¹The Seaver family Bible.

²Letter written by Mrs. W. R. Seaver, no date.

³Stephen Leacock, *Baldwin, Lafontaine, Hincks*, in *The Makers of Canada*, ed. W. L. Grant (Toronto, 1926), VII, 323.

⁴D. G. Creighton, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence* (Toronto, 1937), 378.

that I am glad you and the children are not here, for we are on the Eve of another rebellion, not however a *French Canadian* Revolt but a Rebellion of quite another stamp, and I have no doubt but that ere I close this I shall have to tell you of *martial law, and fires & blood and murder*—but more of this anon, and first I'll speak of *self*—after I left the boat I returned to the house and saw *all right*, got ready for the sale etc, etc. The auction went off *first rate* and my goods generally brought good prices and in many cases they brought more than they cost us. Old *Couches Lounges* etc sold high enough in all conscience and when you get “hard up” you had better turn your attention to making *sofa's for auction sales*, but I'll give you the prices in detail when I get my acct sales from the auctioneer. I have slept at the house with “Major” since you left here and boarded with Norman, and have since concluded to Board with Mrs Bell at 7s pr month and am to have the room over the Kitchen, which I prefer on account of the *dust*. I also have the whole stable as I used to do, and shall be spared the trouble of moving it all which I like much I go there to board May 1st. Business is *terrible dull* and nothing is now talked of but a *republican government*. Today the Govn came to town on horseback attended as usual by an aid and his Groom, went home about 3 o'clock and every one supposed the business of the day concluded and that his excellency had gone to dinner. But in about an hour more he came again to town *in state* attended by his officers and a Guard more than usually numerous. What is all this about? was at once the inquiry. It was not supposed that it could be to give the Royal Sanction to any bill, for before such a sanction is given it is customary to give public notice to that effect and call out the soldiers in front of Parliement house and fire a salute with much more parade etc, but on this occasion there was no notice given and no display nor anything to indicate that the Royal Sanction was to be given to any measure, but it was rumored that the Bill for indemnifying the Rebellion losses was now to be sanctioned tho the members said it was the *New Tariff Bill*, but on the report spreading thru town (which it did like wild-fire) an immense mob assembled and surrounded the Parliement house to see what his Excellency intended to do—and when it was finally announced that he had really given the Royal Sanction to the Bill, then there was *trouble*—as his Excellency left the House for his carriage at the door he was assailed with stones, clubs & rotten & good eggs by thousands, and he was struck in the face with an egg, his carriage windows broken etc. but by the speed of his horses, he was enabled to escape with no injury except to his carriage and his equipage—I stop here for the cry is raised that the *Parliament House* is on fire—fire—fire is the cry—and from my shop door I see the red flames light up the Heavens—I go—more after I see what the row is—

April 26th. Tis too true—Last night about 8 o'clock while Parliement was still sitting a mob (it can be called nothing else tho' composed of some of our most worthy citizens) assembled around the House, and commenced the destruction of the building, by breaking windows etc. Soon the doors were broken open and a stout fellow sprang into the speakers chair with the exclamation “*I dissolve Parliement*” This was the Signal—and immediately in the face of the members, and an immense multitude of spectators the Gas Pipes were fired in a dozen places, and the building wraped in flames—the “Golden Mace”, sacred emblem of Royalty, was seized by the infuriated mob and borne into the street amid shouts of derision & scorn. The Members barely escaped with their lives, and that splendid Building with its rare paintings, all the records of the Prov-

inces from the first settlement, all the acts of Parliament, that Library, worth alone, £100,000, all, all, are destroyed. That splendid portrait of the Queen, which you may remember was dropped into the street, and torn into a thousand pieces, All was lost, nothing saved, and the structure now is but a heap of smoking ruins. The loss to the city cannot be less than £300,000 The fire Engines were not allowed to play upon the fire at all, and it was only on the arrival of General Gore with a body of soldiers that the engines were allowed to approach for the protection of other property. To day there is a terrible excitement in Town no business doing at all. The Guards at Monklands are all doubled, also the Guard at the jail. To day about 20 of our citizens are arrested on the charge of arson & sedition and Committed for trial, *without examination*—Tis said the jail is to be attacked and these men rescued tonight, and no doubt there will be some trouble—I'll try and finish tomorrow—

Apr 27th Dear wife—Truly we are in a great crowd—*Some fun & some not so funny*—all was excitement yesterday—and about 8½ o'clock, last evening a friend came into the store and says "Seaver, you'd better shut shop the mob are coming" I went to the door and one would have thought all hell was loose—St Antoine Street was full of men armed with sticks etc—Fortunately for me they stopt at Mrs Smiths Boarding House, where several of the members of Parliament board, (opposite Gravel's the Carriage Maker) which gave me time to shut the store before the mob reached my place—Mrs Smiths House was attacked by the excited people and all the windows broken and furniture destroyed—Previously to this the mob had destroyed the Houses of the Honerables Mr Hinks and Holmes and gutted them of the furniture etc also attacked the Pilot office (the Government Paper) and broken the windows there—From Mrs Smiths Boarding House they passed my store, and then the cry was "To Lafontains—to Lafontains"—Mr Lafontain you will remember is the *prime minister*. I went with the crowd of course, on reaching the house (which by the way is the Splendid Cut Stone House built by Bourris the Brewer, who failed last spring and whose property was sold at the Bankrupt Court this past winter, and was purchased by the Hon Mr Lafontain, and is just newly and splendidly furnished for the 1st of May, but not yet occupied, situated back of Place St Antoine and in front of Bellevue Terrace) it was surrounded by an immense assembly who very coolly and deliberately set fire to the out Buildings in 3 or 4 places, broke the windows of the House, forced open the doors, and commenced the work of destruction; breaking crockery, china, mirrors, opened the Wine vaults, threw mahogany chairs Tables, bedsteads etc of the most costly and splendid discription out of the window ripped open the feather beds and mattresses, and scattered the contents in the yard. By much labour and perserverance of Mr Phillips' and some private gentlemen the House was not burned tho' fired in many places, but the out buildings were all burnt—such a work of destruction you can scarce conceive of, 'tis horrible—The Soldiers will scarce do duty for the anger is all directed against the Governor and a Canadian Ministry, and the rioters are all mostly those men who are truly loyal, and who in '37 fought *against the very men* whom the *Canadian Ministry* now propose to indemnify out of the pockets of British subjects, for the losses caused by their allegiance to the Sovereign. The soldiers and officers all rather sympathize with the rioters and as yet no attempt has been made by the Military to suppress the disturbance except to make room for the fire engines to save adjoining property—The engines were not allowed to approach Mr

Lafontains House till the soldiers came and formed a guard around the house— At Two o'clock this afternoon there was an assemblage of some Thousands on the "Champ de Mars" which in no way cooled off the excitement, tho, I am not able to say what was done except that resolutions condemnatory of Lord Elgin's conduct were unanimously passed—It is now 8, O'clock P.M. and again the cry of fire is raised and Gen Gore with Two aids have just passed on Horseback with drawn swords and fully armed which means something but what I do not know—Report says that Mr De Witts house is to be burned and sacked to night at any rate they are coming up Craig Street now and I am off to see the fun, if fun it is. There is a Tremendous noise down street, and you Know that Mr. Dewitt is one of the staunch supporters of the Rebellion Loss Bill and it is not at all unlikely that he will have to suffer for it now. We'll see and I'll tell you in the morning how things have gone thru the night If they burn Mr Dewitt out I can stay in my room and look on, but I hope the old man may not be disturbed at all, although he ought not to be called an american, for I hate to have one of the nation so disgrace it as to sanction such a bill— 28th—I went out last eve'g Friday—'Twas our church prayer meeting evening—after we had assembled Mr Hayne said there was to much disturbance in the street in front that the meeting had better be closed and people retire to their homes. Much was done, on going into the street (Great St. James) I found 300 or 400 men assembled, of two opposite parties Viz. The Canadians vs the English speaking portion of the community. They proceeded thru Gt St James, Notre Dame & Craig streets into the Quebec suburbs thence to the Government House which was guarded by 300 *Canadian* militia (The Governor dare'nt trust *British* Soldiers) with Coln laclie also a *French Canadian*, at their head to defend the house and quell disturbance. These 300 militia were armed at government expence with Muskets and cutlasses. The English body unarmed except with clubs and sticks—on perceiving the preparations made by the Canadian Government to receive them, they all retired and only a few shots were fired, which wounded two or three men. tho, I believe not seriously— Both parties will meet again tonight fully armed and there will be bloody work in the streets without doubt—Mr De Witt is as yet uninjured—Mr Hinks, Col Urnatuiges, and some other of the Canadian leaders have been slowly beaten— Col Gagy is a leader of the mob (English) and after an adress which he made on the "Champ de Mars" he was taken on the shoulders of four stout fellows and bourn in triumph thru the streets—much more of disturbance I might write you but it is time to close—The quarrel is a war of *Races*—*English speaking people* will not be ruled by a *Canadian* Government, and none can see what the end of these things will yet be—Shall it be the extermination of the Canadian Race? God only knows—But we are in trouble enough now, and blood will be shed worse yet than in the Rebellion of '37. The papers I send you with this will give you some more particulars—Have no fear for me, I am only a looker on, and shall take care to keep out of harms way—Frost says I am a *damed fool* and had better stay at home or I shall yet be a depository for Canadian Pills (i.e. bullets) I think he is rather *scared*—Ive seen as plucky men as he is—What is Newick going to do—Be sure you get the £ 18. he owes me—Why wont Frank and Warren pay it for him—I am too poor to lose it—look sharp—I send you \$5. and will continue to remit to you as I can spare it—use all the money you *need*—Enjoy your visit—Write me often—Send me papers—Don't waste so much paper when you write—but fill up your sheets—

You've got *brains* enough only *stir* them up—be active, both in *thought & Action*. Ann comes up to make my bed, and get my dirty clothes. She is to live with Mrs Bell from May 1st I have rented the house over my store for £25. to a good tenant—Kiss the children—Their pictures and yours are comforts for me—and they dont make a noise—I've not half done—but must close—More when you write me—I can't read this over for corrections so excuse

Your affectionat husban

W R Seaver