

# Vice-Admiral Sir Charles Saunders, Naval Victor of Quebec 1759

## Barry Gough

*Vice-amiral Sir Charles Saunders, commandant des forces navales britanniques au siège de Québec en 1759, a incarné le superbe professionnalisme qui était clef au succès de la marine royale. La marine, à son tour, était essentielle à l'expansion de l'empire britannique, un argument particulièrement bien renforcé par les opérations à Québec qui ont eu comme conséquence l'acquisition du Canada par la Grande-Bretagne. Dans ce sens, la vigueur de la marine royale a profondément influencé l'histoire canadienne, non seulement dans la victoire britannique en 1759, mais aussi dans le rôle central de la marine royale dans la défense du Canada pendant au moins le siècle et demi qui ont suivi. Pourtant le rôle pivot de Saunders à Québec a été éclipsé par le Général James Wolfe, commandant de l'armée qui est mort en héros pendant la bataille critique pour la ville. L'article actuel démontre l'éclat de Saunders en tant que chef, administrateur et diplomate; il prouve également que, sa vie durant, il a été également béni par cet autre élément essentiel du succès, la bonne chance.*

Many are the examples of the interventions of naval force and amphibious capability in the history of North America and particularly of Canada. A few examples will suffice. The English Kirke brothers took Quebec in 1529 and held it for three years. Sir William Phips, in 1690, commanded a New England expedition and failed to take Quebec for a number of reasons, not least a storm that wreaked disaster on the fleet. In 1711, Admiral Sir Hovenden Walker's fleet came to grief on the rock of islets known as Île aux Oeufs in the River St. Lawrence. Then again, in 1746, a French fleet suffered from scurvy, lapses of leadership, and many gales, and in consequence could not take Annapolis Royal or consider other military objectives.<sup>1</sup> And, to cite one last example, a British squadron suffered heavily from a hurricane off Cape Breton in 1757, destroying any hope of an early capture of Louisbourg. Diplomacy, too, favoured the French

---

<sup>1</sup> James Pritchard, *Anatomy of a Naval Disaster: The 1746 French Expedition to North America* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).

retention of New France, Acadia and Canada throughout all this period. But as of the end of the War of the Austrian Succession it became clear to many, not least Admiral Peter Warren at Boston in recounting the circumstances to the Board of Admiralty in London, “it seems now to be a struggle between the French and us, who shall be masters of the continent.”<sup>2</sup> The scales began to tip in Britain’s favour, and to France’s disadvantage, with the founding of Halifax as an “anchor of empire” – a means for imperial defence but also a means of force projection, both coastwise and into the interior. Ships not fortresses would control the destiny of the new world. Britain, with its surging maritime capacity, was well placed to secure that supremacy in Canada.<sup>3</sup>

The decisive event in this war of empires came at Quebec in 1759. Vice-Admiral Sir Charles Saunders, the naval hero of the British victory, will always stand in the shade of Major-General James Wolfe.<sup>4</sup> There are many reasons for this imbalanced state, not least the fact that the victor in the land campaign died on the field of battle, as did his opponent commander, and was immortalized in story and in art. As the Canadian historian Michel Brunet once commented, a little derisively, about the rebel leader Louis Joseph Papineau who fled to the United States to escape authorities in 1837, a true hero ought not to die in bed but on the field of conflict. But Wolfe was a brilliant military commander, justly acclaimed as perhaps the greatest practitioner of combined warfare since Drake down to the twentieth century and perhaps after.<sup>5</sup> Had Wolfe not fought at Quebec his name would still stand high in the annals of British military history and amphibious operations.

But what about Saunders? He has never received the due that he deserves. He was doubtless one of many competent fleet commanders of his time, though he had never commanded a fleet in battle, and although his disposition in the Quebec campaign was neither sensational nor marked by any failure he conducted his affairs with administrative brilliance. His managerial skills were impressive. So were his leadership abilities. These were what counted in the circumstances. Combined with these were outstanding luck and both strategical and tactical flair. He was a clever tactician in amphibious operations, for his convincing feint was directed against Montcalm’s lines on the Beauport shore. While

<sup>2</sup> Quoted, *ibid.*, 227. See, on this, Julian Gwyn, “The Royal Navy in North America, 1712-1776,” in Jeremy Black and Philip Woodfine, eds., *The British Navy and the Use of Naval Power in the Eighteenth Century* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988), 129-47.

<sup>3</sup> By Canada in this instance is meant Cape Breton (Louisbourg) and New France. On British global sea power capacities, see Richard Harding, *Seapower and Naval Warfare, 1650-1830* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1999). On the British ministry and war machinery, see Richard Middleton, *Bells of Victory: The Pitt-Newcastle Ministry and the Conduct of the Seven Years’ War, 1757-1762* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> A first recounting of the experiences of Saunders at Quebec is to be found in *The Naval Chronicle* 8 (1802).

<sup>5</sup> Julian S. Corbett, *England in the Seven Years’ War: A Study in Combined Strategy* (2 vols. London: Longman’s 1907). This work remains in print, and I have used this one, with its differed title: *The Seven Years War: A Study in British Combined Strategy* (London: The Folio Society, 2001). His appreciation of Wolfe runs through the volume, but the specific reference to Wolfe as master of combined operations appears at p. 66.

this was proceeding in strength, Wolfe's infantry, away above Quebec, mounted to the Heights of Abraham and determined the field of battle. This brought success to British arms after weeks of failure and frustration, a considerable achievement in the constrained environment of riverine operations and littoral combat.

Saunders was Britannia's trident bearer at a unique time in history, and yet to this day no biographer has written his full life.<sup>6</sup> He has left a faint paper trail, perhaps an insurmountable problem for the biographer seeking a comprehensive life of the man. He is another one of those figures of the past who appear like the transit of a June bug of a summer's evening in the forest – flashes of brilliance as progression is made into the darkening gloom. As a subject here, in such brief compass, no definitive biography is attempted. No pretence is made here of examining the progress of the siege in detail.<sup>7</sup> But the novelty here may be that we find yet again in Canada's history, that of the British Empire-Commonwealth as a whole and of international and global history more generally, another chapter in the influence of sea power in determining the course of empires. The projection of military influence overseas, the attempted throttling of French marine abilities by blockade, especially by what is known as the "Western Squadron," and the joint and combined activities of the Royal Navy and the British Army in (sometimes faltering) amphibious operations – these, and others – are lucrative lodes for the student of history. They are also valuable wellsprings for analysts of maritime strategy (often placed in contradistinction to continental strategy), for those who study the history of combined operations and of amphibious warfare, those who examine the notion of limited warfare, and, not least, those who have argued that overall command of the sea – "blue water" preponderance – is not what is necessarily required for victory. Rather the requirement is for task forces suitably manned and equipped, with good intelligence on their side, and not a little bit of good fortune even luck, and headed up by great statesmen and military and naval leaders of high professional standing.<sup>8</sup> The life of

---

<sup>6</sup> Of brief lives to date, I have relied on Oliver Warner, *Command at Sea: Great Fighting Admirals from Hawke to Nimitz* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), ch.2, and William H. Whiteley, "Sir Charles Saunders," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 4 (1979): 698-702. The latter, the best biography, contains a preliminary guide to the sources, printed and manuscript. See also, the brief entry in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 49 (2004): 31-32.

<sup>7</sup> Gerald S. Graham, *The Empire of the North Atlantic: The Maritime Struggle for North America*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), 182.

<sup>8</sup> The campaign (naval and military) of Quebec 1759 naturally invites comparison of the maritime strategies of the undeniable giants of military history and theory, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett. It will be clear from my analysis of the 1759 campaign, that overall command of the sea, as Mahan proclaimed it, was an essential feature of the measures that allowed the Admiralty and British Army to project its power for a protracted period so as to accomplish its intentions. The latter is undeniably Corbettian and fits not only his understanding of combined operations and especially amphibious warfare but also of "limited war." The respective theories of sea power are explained in comparative perspective in Barry M. Gough, "Maritime Strategy: The Legacies of Mahan and Corbett as Philosophers of Sea Power," *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies* 133 (Winter 1988): 55-88.

Saunders is an entree into all these themes. But in addition to this already heavily textured treatise we also have the historiographical considerations.

If recent literature is any indication, the Seven Years' War has not been put on the back burner. In the past fifteen years alone we have seen at least two fine histories of the war and there may be others. Fred Anderson and William Fowler Jr. have written acclaimed books, and both authors are American scholars.<sup>9</sup> (Canadian historians seem not to want to touch the topic and rely largely on that classic Charles Stacey's *Quebec, 1759: The Siege and the Battle*, first published in 1959 upon the two hundredth anniversary of the event, and recently, in 2002, republished in a revised edition with excellent editorial and additional detail, some naval, by Donald E. Graves.<sup>10</sup>) There is a recent biography of Wolfe that has attracted favourable notice.<sup>11</sup> *Three Victories and a Defeat*, by Brendan Simms, calls us to consider this as essentially a European war with European ends, and all we may need to say about that is that he has only told half the story, though brilliantly.<sup>12</sup> Years ago, L.H. Gipson wrote a fifteen volume history of the war as one for Empire and he had a great deal of North American history in it. But if we read the pages of Frances Jennings (*The Empire of Fortune*), we find that Gipson has left out the Indian or First Nations side of the story. When taken together with Richard White's *The Middle Ground* we discover that the other side of the frontier, so to speak, has been distorted or left out altogether.<sup>13</sup>

What about the maritime dimensions of the topic? Students of maritime history will know that Sir Julian Corbett is given due credit for having first written the maritime history of this war, with Quebec 1759 as the centre piece. If you read his preface you will find that many of his professional credits are given to Captain E.J. W. Slade, RN, then Director of Naval Intelligence and previously captain of the Naval War College at Greenwich where Corbett had been lecuting on maritime strategy as he saw it. Slade's broad knowledge of the art of war, and his vetting of Corbett's manuscript, helped shape that work into the great one of its age – and one for all time. From Doughty's published

<sup>9</sup> Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000) and William M. Fowler, *Empires at War: The French and Indian War and the Struggle for North America, 1754-1763* (New York: Walker & Co., 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Published in Montreal by Robin Brass Studio.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Brumwell, *Paths of Glory: The Life and Death of General James Wolfe* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Brendan Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire, 1714-1783* (London: Allen Lane, 2007). For a book about the British Empire it is surprising how little colonial content is included. The historical debate is an old one. See, for instance, Richard Pares, "American versus Continental Warfare, 1739-63," *English Historical Review* 51 (July 1936): 420-65.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence H. Gipson, *The British Empire Before the American Revolution. Vol. 7: The Victorious Years, 1758-1760* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949). Frances Jennings, *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies & Tribes in the Seven Years War in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988). Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

documents, especially volumes four, five and six, he gleaned the great outline of the Canadian story, and from The National Archives (the Public Record Office as was) and the British Library (British Museum's Manuscripts Division) he had the run of the political, cabinet and operational papers, uniquely the Admiralty Secretary In- and Out-letters that are the bread and butter of any serious student of naval operations on any seas.

Saunders owed his early advancement to Lord Anson. But "influence" alone did not account for his advancement: he had formidable personal qualities of his own and an enviable measure of luck, as Oliver Warner puts it. Walpole wrote of him: "that brave statue... a pattern of the most sturdy bravery. No man said less or did more."<sup>14</sup> This was praise indeed for a member of a Service allegedly silent. Influence and ability, when in handsome balance, brought advancement, renewed opportunity, and a rise in station. Saunders's advancement in the navy was matched by progress ashore, in Parliament and as a member of the well-heeled gentry and a considerable landholder. '

Saunders was born in 1713, went to sea as a boy, and was vaulted up to lieutenant at age 21. Anson picked him as first lieutenant of the *Centurion* for his expedition to attack the Spanish in the Pacific.<sup>15</sup> As it happened, Saunders was sent to take charge of the sloop *Tryal*, and in this vessel he doubled Cape Horn in the most appalling weather. He reached Juan Fernandez with but a small fraction of the ship's company having survived. He was a consummate seaman and navigator. Anson sent Saunders home from Macau with dispatches and he never was part of the famed capture of the Manila galleon which yielded such treasure as had been seldom seen in London. But all the same his career had been well launched. In 1741 he was made post-captain. His financial gains, so long deferred in strength, now came quickly from naval actions. He had much good luck in gathering what Admiral Vernon called "the flowers of the sea," and got a tenth of a share in the capture of a Spanish ship worth £30,000.<sup>16</sup> He spent the long fishing season as naval commodore in Newfoundland waters, 1752, and thereafter he became an articulate advocate of preserving the Newfoundland and Labrador fisheries as a nursery of British seamen. His political star rose correspondingly with Anson's success, and he became member of Parliament for Plymouth, then later treasurer of Greenwich Hospital and still later comptroller of the Navy. Promotion to flag rank came in 1756, when Anson was first lord of the Admiralty. What the government under the elder Pitt (Lord Chatham) intended to do in the war that had just begun formally with France (and later Spain) meant that timing was on his side, and the steady favour dispensed by his patron never flagged. War gave him opportunity to display his considerable gifts.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile he had married the only daughter of the London banker James Buck.

<sup>14</sup> Warner, *Command at Sea*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Saunders and his cruise with Anson can be pieced together from various accounts, including Glyndwr Williams, ed., *Documents Relating to Anson's Voyage Round the World, 1740-1744* (London: Navy Records Society, 1967). Saunders was loyal to his chief and was not part of the carping and legal action taken against him by others anxious for prize money. This may explain Anson's subsequent favoritism to Saunders.

<sup>16</sup> This is Warner's figure, but it is sometimes stated as £40,000 – in any event, a princely sum. Saunders was to go on to collect many "flowers of the sea," and he died a very wealthy man.

<sup>17</sup> The above observations rely heavily on Warner, *Command at Sea*, 32.

Saunders had much sea time with the outbreak of war, first as second in command of the Mediterranean squadron under Admiral Hawke in 1756 after the failure at Minorca and then to the command proper when Hawke returned to England. With the advent of Pitt to power in 1757 the accentuated emphasis on maritime aspects of the war favoured his advancement. The capture of Louisbourg in 1758,<sup>18</sup> reflected this policy and opened the way for an expedition against Quebec – one which we note also was coordinated with interior thrusts, advances up the line of Lakes George and Champlain, and attacks by colonial regiments as far west as Fort Niagara.

Our concern here is necessarily Quebec and Saunders's role in it, but we are reminded that one of the reasons for the ministry's decision to capture Quebec once and for all – and not to return Louisbourg to the French at the subsequent peace, as had been done in the previous war – was to provide security to the American colonists, whose governors and assemblies had been screaming for the secure defence of their northern and western borders, where the French and their Indian allies provided a near and present danger. A puny Yorkshire woolen interest in Parliament urged the taking and keeping of Canada, thinking that West Riding worsteds would have a big sale in frigid Canada, and the West of England fishing interest lobbied for better protection of the cod fisheries against French depredations and incursions. But that Canada proper was to be acquired for commercial gains was hardly in the cards, for the Hudson's Bay Company was dubious of having a St. Lawrence-based trade in rival British hands. Canada was never seriously considered as a bargaining chip at the peace table so as to gain even more "sugar islands," even the lucrative Martinique and Guadeloupe.<sup>19</sup> No, the reason for the intended capture of Quebec was strategic gain and a hoped for end to rivalry with France in North America.

---

<sup>18</sup> A.J.B. Johnston, *Endgame 1758: The Promise, the Glory and the Despair of Louisbourg's Last Decade* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Years ago, in 1966, I went, as an M.A. student, through the files about all the various *commercial* (banking and trading) interests that pressured the British ministry about what the war aims ought to be, what should be captured, and what should be retained. The ministry was clearheaded and had its own objectives, though it took all these considerations on board. The pressures were considerable, notably from the East India lobby and the West India "sugar" interest. In the latter instance no further rivals were desired, and certainly not Martinique and Guadeloupe (which were more productive than, say, Jamaica). What Britain did acquire was Dominica, Tobago and St. Vincent but others were relinquished to the French (St. Lucia) and Cuba returned to the Spanish. Pitt, who by 1763 was in opposition, attacked all measures of the Bute government at the Peace to mollify France or weaken British advantages in trade and maritime capabilities. His attack on the Treaty of Paris centered primarily on the West India settlement. The ministry, he claimed, had "lost sight of the great fundamental principle, that France is chiefly, if not solely, to be dreaded by us in the light of a maritime and commercial power." William Cobbett, *Parliamentary History of England from the Norman Conquest* (36 vols. London, 1806-20), 15: 1265. My thesis was published as *British Mercantile Interests in the Making of the Peace of Paris, 1763: Trade, War, and Empire* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, Studies in British History 30, 1992).

The Pitt “system,” as its author termed it, called for two essentials: first, subsidizing one or more allies on the European continent; second, using the fleet in three different ways: to raid enemy coasts, thereby pinning down enemy military forces; to blockade the enemy and destroy his fleet; and to convoy and support military units so as to be able to seize enemy possessions overseas and destroy associated seaborne trade. Pitt subsidized heavily his ally Frederick the Great of Prussia under the maxim that America would be won on the battlefields of Europe. Hanover needed to be protected. But this was only half of it. Britain planned what were then called “conjunct expeditions” – amphibious raids against French ports. The first of these was directed at Rochefort in the fall of 1757, and failed mainly for want of planning. Others, St. Malo, June 1758, and Cherbourg, August 1758, were somewhat better in terms of success. As Sir Basil Liddell Hart, acclaimed by some as the greatest military strategist and historian, remarked when pointing out this in 1962, “The history of warfare shows that the basic strategic asset of sea-based peoples is amphibious flexibility. In tackling land-based opponents, they can produce a distraction to the enemy’s power of concentration that is advantageously disproportionate to the scale of force they employ and the resources they possess.” Geographical circumstances had obliged the British to engage in more amphibious operations than any power (to that date) “but her performance has been much poorer than her experience.” He went on to say that “When they met any serious opposition their expeditionary forces more often failed than succeeded. A study of the record shows that the most frequent cause of failure lay in a mutual misunderstanding of the other Service’s problems. All too often, the attack miscarried or evaporated in a wrangle among the ‘co-operating’ Services.”<sup>20</sup>

This may have been the case at Rochefort, and elsewhere in other wars, but was not the case at Quebec or Louisbourg. General Wolfe, who had been at Rochefort, learned all the essential lessons of war. These, in a golden utterance, he wrote about to a friend in private:

I have found out an Admiral should endeavour to run into an enemy’s port immediately ...; that he should anchor the transports and frigates as close as he can to the land; that he should reconnoiter and observe it as quickly as possible, and lose no time in getting the troops ashore; that previous directions should be given in respect to landing the troops and a proper disposition for the boats of all sorts, appointing leaders and fit persons for conducting the different divisions. Nothing is to be reckoned an obstacle to an understanding of this nature which is not found to be so on trial; that in war something must be allowed to chance and fortune, seeing that it is in its nature hazardous and an option of difficulties; that the greatness of an object should come under consideration as opposed to the impediments that lie in the way; that the honour of one’s country is to have some weight; and that, in particular circumstances and times, the loss of a thousand men is rather an

---

<sup>20</sup> He also pointed out that Britain lacked specifically designated and trained units for such amphibious operations. His respect for the U.S. Marine Corps was justifiably high. See his foreword to Robert D. Heinl, Jr., *Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps, 1775-1962* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1962), esp. ix-x.

advantage to a nation than otherwise, seeing that gallant attempts raise its reputation and make it respectable...<sup>21</sup>

These evaluations by the master of “the watery maze” ought not to be used as a template against which to lay out an evaluation of what happened at Quebec. “There may be no magic about Combined Ops,” writes one authority, “but they have always called for ingenuity and original thinking.”<sup>22</sup> The environmental circumstances called for special consideration. The geography and hydrography of Quebec was unique; so were the seasons. The river had strong currents and for a sailing ship was a narrow, hazardous stream (one made narrower by the enemy’s guns ashore). The general tendency of winds were up and down the river channel, and more customarily down than up, a deterrent to advancement up river. The season was drawing on, the distant grip of winter and ice assured with the passage of time. These were circumstances that advantaged the French lying in their fastness of the Quebec fortress. The British would have to choose the field of decisive battle; that was the rub. This was a riverine operation in which the Royal Navy and transports needed to pass along the flanks of French gunnery, pepper the enemy ashore as a form of feint or cover of troops landing from boats and bateaux, oust the enemy from islands in the stream or far shore across from the fortress, and, if fortune should present itself nicely, land some force – not a diversion this time but the real thing – at some unlikely place so as to gain a field for battle. Wolfe’s rules of the game acquired at Rochefort may have applied in the abstract but the reality of what faced him in the summer of 1759 had its own peculiarities and, therefore, requirements.

Anson, now first lord of the Admiralty, gave naval command of the expedition to Saunders, then age 45, who flew his flag in the *Neptune*, 90 guns. Anson left no evidence as to why he selected Saunders but obviously he had every confidence in his junior. Wolfe was then age 32. Wolfe’s health was poor and he embarked in no cheerful spirit. He had a nervous and argumentative disposition. “I am in a very bad condition, both gravel and Rheumatism, but I would much rather die than decline any kind of service that offers,” he confided to a friend. This command, with commission as major-general, was an independent one, and it offered a “a very peculiar turn for war,” as one of his staff said. Saunders, so opposite in disposition to Wolfe, had under his command a large fleet including the famous *Centurion*, and he had two rear-admirals under him, Philip Durell, wintering at Halifax, that old counterweight to Louisbourg, and Charles Holmes, whose knowledge of the North America station was extensive.

The voyage was a tiresome one, irksome to Wolfe and undoubtedly tiresome to all who were anxious to get on with the campaign ashore. And we have no idea of subjects discussed at table, if at all, or what planning was done en route. We can imagine that the general tendencies for the attack were set down, but as to the specifics that would have to await the event, the circumstances and the opportunities afforded. Wolfe was fond of keeping plans close to his chest, and only later in the course of the campaign as days

---

<sup>21</sup> Robert Wright, *The Life of Major General James Wolfe* (London, 1864), 396-97.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Ferguson, *The Watery Maze: The History of Combined Operations* (London: Collins, 1961), 15



and weeks passed did he seek the opinions, counsel and agreement of his brigadiers. All this lay in the future

The fleet did not reach Halifax until the end of April. To their surprise, Admiral Durell was still at anchor. Wolfe wrote harshly about Durell and his captains, and he wrote that these naval officers knew that they were in “a devilish scrape, and that they should be call’d to a severe account for not being in the chops of the River early enough to prevent supplies going to Quebec.” They were worried about ice. The army was all for sailing. “Canada would certainly have been an easy conquest had the Squadron gone early enough into the River.”<sup>23</sup> This was correct. Colonel Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, sent to France for reinforcements and supplies the previous fall, had eluded the British blockade on his early return. Bougainville was providentially saved by the same ice at Cabot Strait that hindered Durell but broke up before him.<sup>24</sup> With three frigates and seventeen supply ships, he was upriver just in time. Durell has been condemned by many an historian, and we await the final verdict, but it is the opinion of Warner that it was left to Sanders to redeem in full the honour of the Navy.<sup>25</sup>

Bougainville reached his destination and took up command west of Quebec, and he was there when a vast spread of canvas – Saunders’s armada of 140 ships, transports and auxiliaries, fresh from Halifax and the staging ground of Louisbourg, taken the year before by General Jeffrey Amherst – entered the tidal river. Many of these vessels came to anchor in the basin before Quebec, on the south side of Île d’Orléans. Saunders had shifted his flag to the *Stirling Castle*, 64 guns, a ship more nimble for river navigation than the *Neptune*.

Much has been written on the navigational difficulties of the St. Lawrence, including the notable Traverse, and the use of French and English pilots. The details cannot be recounted here on grounds of space save to note that the piloting work was heroic and absolutely vital to British success.<sup>26</sup> The difficulties of the Traverse had been exaggerated, notably by local pilots. Saunders’s force consisted of 23 ships of the line and 13 frigates and a total of 12,500 sailors; there were 9,200 British regulars under Wolfe. Unlike at Louisbourg the previous year, the sailors outnumbered the soldiers – recognition as well as a tribute to the particular maritime needs of this particular campaign. By this time, too, General Amherst’s large and largely colonial force, was striking from the south for the Richelieu River, and further west a smaller British force was destined to capture Fort Niagara – the means of exercising influence on eastern Lake Ontario and across the portage into Lake Erie. From Fort Oswego, eastern Lake Ontario, too, an armada was being readied for a subsequent year of the war to descend the rapids

---

<sup>23</sup> Quoted, Warner, *Command at Sea*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Victor Suthren, *The Sea Has No End: The Life of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2004), 80-81.

<sup>25</sup> Warner, *Command at Sea*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> John Knox, *Historical Journal of the Campaigns in North America, 1757-60*, Volume I (London, 1767), 290. This provides commentary on pilots, French and English. On the hydrographic puzzles and solutions, see Victor Suthren, *To Go Upon Discovery: James Cook and Canada, from 1758 to 1779* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2000), ch.5.



and treacherous saults of the St. Lawrence to make the final blow at Montreal.

On 20 June, from his flagship at anchor before Quebec, Saunders awaited news from Durell upriver as to the activities of the French Navy. Such news reached him that day, and it was welcome. First, it confirmed the safe arrival of French reinforcements but, second, it also revealed that the possibility of French naval intervention from downriver had disappeared. Saunders now sent the transports upriver and brought the men of war after them. One week later, as noted, the fleet had entered the Quebec Basin. A bad, exposed anchorage needed to be exchanged for a better one, the South Channel of Orléans.<sup>27</sup> This occurred on 27 June Saunders, when he settled his fleet in the south channel between Pointe-Lévy and Pointe d'Orléans.

But that spot was terribly exposed, generally speaking downstream and downwind of certain French forces. The French sent fire ships down on them the following night but they were gingerly parried by British tars in boats. The fleet set up a communications system, landed the artillery on the Lévy shore and elsewhere, offloaded the barges and assault craft, ferried messages to and fro, and provided bombardment on occasion. Saunders also covered Wolfe's landing on the Île d'Orléans. As per their instructions, drafted by Pitt, Saunders and Wolfe worked closely and in concert. Still, there were strains altogether natural in the circumstances and given the personalities involved. Wolfe's failed attack near the Montmorency Falls on 31 July brought about the greatest strain between the two commanders. Wolfe blamed the Navy's inadequate covering fire, and wrote about it in a letter to Pitt. He let Saunders see the draft. Saunders objected, and Wolfe dropped the criticism, though he still believed the facts were as originally stated. Wolfe referred to Saunders as a "brave zealous officer."<sup>28</sup> In subsequent operations, including the most critical, boat work was outstanding, and seamen, doing the heavy hauling of empire, dragged one hundred of the army's field pieces to the heights of Quebec.



Illustration 2: Early 19th century vignette honouring Wolfe and Saunders. Artist unknown. Courtesy ACS.

Saunders "seemed to relish the amphibious challenge." Saunders, writes Sir John Keegan in our most recent appreciation of the admiral and his relation to General Wolfe, "had all the qualities of the best sort of naval officer. No narrow pettifogger, martinet or nervous apprehender of the Board of Admiralty's displeasure, he was on the contrary liked by his sailors, for whose welfare he cared, and was a bold risk-taker."

<sup>27</sup> On the anchorage's complications and advantages, see Corbett, *Seven Years War*, 319.

<sup>28</sup> Whiteley, *DCB*, 700.

Leaving aside the validity of Keegan's stereotype of admirals and their masters, he hit on an important point – Saunders's willingness for inshore action and coastwise operations. "Someone more timid, more bound by regulations, might have insisted that he had done his duty by delivering the army to the appointed place. Sailors hate operations in confined waters, commonly stand on their right not to hazard their ships by grounding on shoal or reef, and resist suggestions that they should penetrate any further into hostile waters than the point at which they have debarked soldiers." To prove his point, Keegan notes that as early as 18 July Saunders had run two frigates past Quebec and "rousted about in French territory," as he puts it incautiously. Then, on 5 August, he sent five more ships up the river and did likewise four days later. On the fifth, too, he sent up twenty flat boats. These last went undetected. This growing British presence above Quebec, however, could not fail to attract attention as it did eventually. This put the Marquis de Montcalm, the French commander, on the defensive and obliged him to detail Bougainville to maintain "an exhausting vigil against the British commando raids." Corbett, by contrast, does not favour the argument that Saunders's initiative in getting ships up past the Quebec narrows became the basis of Wolfe's final plan and disposition of forces, and he seems to state that there was not a little chance in the way the whole was finally determined upon. Compare this to what Keegan says. "Saunders's enterprise became Wolfe's plan," says Keegan, and he quotes Wolfe's letter to Saunders of early September just before the whole scheme of assault at Ainse au Foulon opened in such magnificent but as of yet hazardous glory: "It will be necessary to run as many small craft as possible by the town... the small vessels can take us in occasionally ... and run us back again in a tide... perhaps we may find an opportunity to strike a blow." Wolfe's brigadiers, upon request for advice, had given the opinion that the most probable method of striking an effectual blow would be by directing their operations above the town. "M. de Montcalm must fight us upon our terms. We are betwixt him and his provisions." The key to the campaign thus became the naval and potential amphibious operations on the river above Quebec fortress. Waterways determined the ways and the destination of the approach. Bougainville had 3000 men under his command, patrolling the shore and ready to pounce on any assault columns landed from the enemy's boats. "The most important point," Montcalm told him, "'is to follow every movement of the corps which you have on the water in front of you. You will thus always be on the spot to deal with their disembarkation.'"<sup>29</sup>

But this was only one of Saunders's roles and initiatives. At the same time as those frigates were passing upriver to challenge and tempt the French above the town, diversionary measures were taken up. Saunders prepared a massed attack with marines against Beauport, thus freezing Montcalm in his defences. If the principle of surprise was at work here so was the other tenet of modern amphibious warfare, deception. On 12 September, Saunders conducted his highly successful feint at Beauport just before dark using marines in boats and the conspicuous laying of buoys.<sup>30</sup> Saunders's technique kept

---

<sup>29</sup> The above, including quotations, is drawn from John Keegan, *Warpaths: Travels of a Military Historian in North America* (Toronto: Key Porter, 1995), 131-32.

<sup>30</sup> Roger Keyes, *Amphibious Warfare and Combined Operations* (Lees Knowles Lectures,

the French forces both preoccupied and divided, opening to Wolfe, meanwhile, the opportunity that he had so long hoped for. But feint was critical and diversionary actions, too. "Behind the screen of the British fleet," writes Graham,

Wolfe's army maneuvered at will up the whole thirty miles of river from Montmorency to Pointe-aux-Trembles. Saunders's technique provided a supreme example of the value of diversionary movements to conceal an intended landing spot. The enemy had no opportunity to learn whether a real attack was coming or merely a feint; even if troops were landed they could not be sure that such a demonstration was not intended to cover the main attack elsewhere. As it happened, the French, in an effort to guard their flanks, were bound to weaken their middle defences by overstretching. Two important landing places, Anse des Mères and Anse du [sic] Foulon, were left with only a militia guard.<sup>31</sup>

Saunders takes up the story in his bald, unadorned report of proceedings to the secretary of the Admiralty, John Cleveland. This account was written more than a week after the Battle of the Plains of Abraham and after the subsequent securing of the garrison, fortifications and town had been completed. He wrote:

the troops... embarked on board the ships and vessels above the town in the night of the 6<sup>th</sup>, and at four in the morning of the 13<sup>th</sup> began to land on the north shore, about a mile and a half above the town. General Montcalm and his whole army left their camps at Beauport, and marched to meet him. A little before ten both armies were formed and the enemy began the attack. Our troops received their fire and reserved their own, advancing till they were so near as to run in upon them and push them with their bayonets, by which, in a very little time, the French gave way, and fled to the town in utmost disorder, and with great loss, for our troops pursued them quite to the town, and killed many upon the glacis and in the ditch and if the town had been further off, the whole French arm must have been destroyed; about two hundred and fifty prisoners were taken that day among whom, are ten captains and six subaltern officers, all of whom will go in the great ships to England.<sup>32</sup>

Saunders also recounted, again with undeniable brevity, the particulars of the night of their landing of the force. Admiral Holmes with the ships and troops was about nine miles above the intended landing place. Wolfe and half his troops went off in the boats and dropped down with the tide. By so doing they were less likely to be discovered by the sentinels posted all along the coast. The ships followed about three-quarters of an hour later. They arrived in perfect and planned timing so as to be able to cover their landing. "Considering the darkness of the night and the rapidity of the current," remarked

---

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943), 15.

<sup>31</sup> Graham, *Empire of the North Atlantic*, 186.

<sup>32</sup> Saunders to Cleveland, 21 September 1759, Adm. 1/482, fols. 112-13; this is printed in John Hattendorf et al., eds., *British Naval Documents, 1204-1960* (Aldershot: Scolar Press for Navy Records Society, 1993), 391-93.

Saunders, “this was a very critical operation, and very properly and successfully conducted.” He then described the difficulty of the high, steep and only single-file ascent to the Plains of Abraham, the troops dragging themselves up by pulling on stumps and boughs of trees that covered the declivity.

Saunders states that immediately upon the victory of the land forces he sent all the boats in the fleet in with artillery and ammunition. The French had not yet capitulated. Thus on the seventeenth, four days after the land battle and the routing of the French army – Saunders does not dwell on this, and states the details matter of factly – he “went up with the men-of-war, in a disposition to attack the lower town as soon as General Townsend [who had assumed command ashore] was ready to do so by the upper, but in the evening they sent out to the camp and offered terms of capitulation.”<sup>33</sup> The capitulation was completed on the eighteenth. Saunders was one of the British signatories; Townshend, the other.

In addition to the customary conclusions that such an in-letter would report after a glorious action – that is, which naval officers and ships would sail for home or be detached on other assignments – Saunders made one further statement worth repeating here: “I have the pleasure also of acquainting their Lordships that during this tedious



*Illustration 3: The famous death of Major-General James Wolfe at Quebec, 13 September 1759, as conceived and executed by Benjamin West in 1770. One of the portraits of heroes in the throws of death it rivals many showing Nelson's exit from this world.*

campaign, there has continued a perfect good understanding between the army and the Navy. I have received great assistance from Admirals Durell and Holmes, and from all the captains. Indeed everybody has exerted themselves in the execution of their duty; even the transports have willingly assisted me with their boats and people on landing the troops and many other services.”<sup>34</sup>

Townshend succeeded to the command on the death of Wolfe. He knew the compliment that had to be paid and paid in full. Writing to Pitt, he paid this high tribute to the Navy:

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 393.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

I should not do Justice to the Admirals, and the Naval Service, if I neglected this Occasion of acknowledging how much we are indebted for our Success to the constant Assistance and support received from them, and the perfect Harmony and Correspondence, which has prevailed throughout all our Operations, in the uncommon Difficulties, which the Nature of this Country, in particular, presents to military Operations of a great Extent, and which no Army can itself solely supply; the immense labour in Artillery, Stores and Provisions; the long Watchings and Attendance in Boats; the drawing up of our Artillery by the Seamen, even in the Heat of Action; it is my Duty, short as my Command has been, to acknowledge, for that Time, how great a Share the Navy has had in this successful Campaign.<sup>35</sup>

No British fleet could be left at Quebec, for the winter would ruin it, and supplies and provisions were running low. A small force was left behind, under command of Captain Spry, its duty to watch the French. Only two sloops were kept at Quebec, but generally speaking there was no place where vessels could remain afloat in winter on account of the ice and the tides. The technique of “wintering in” was not yet known or used here by the British. By 5 December the river was solid ice. By spring one of the sloops was a near wreck. Townshend sailed for home with Saunders. In Saunders’s possession was the light silver plate that Wolfe had left him. Townshend disliked the whole campaign, and Saunders referred to it as a tedious affair, which it was, at least in comparison to “gathering the flowers of the sea.”

Others were left in command at Quebec, in particular Major-General James Murray, who later became the first (military) governor of the Province of Quebec. The British position remained tenuous, until such time as yet again there was sight of a sail heading up the river towards the battlements. “On the morning of May 9,” writes Gerald Graham, “the first flecks of white sail were sighted, and anxious watchers on the ramparts and along the banks gazed eastward as a frigate came slowly up the river. A tiny bundle ascended slowly to the masthead, hung motionless for a moment, and then broke out into the white ensign. It was the *Lowestoft*, heralding the approach of a squadron under Captain Swanton, with stores and men.” In the circumstances, the French force under de Lévis which had placed such menacing pressure on Murray’s “poor pitiful handful of half-starved scorbutic skeletons,” was obliged to withdraw up river. General Amherst pressed from the west, his control of Lake Ontario having been made secure – he established a royal dockyard at Oswego and laid down two small men of war – and Montreal fell to him on 8 September 1760.

Ice conditions at the entrance to the river allowed the passage of Swanton’s squadron in the spring of 1760. Much could be speculated about if it had been a French squadron, for Quebec must have fallen to the French in May. Lord Colville, sailing from Halifax, where he had wintered, had effected a rendezvous with Swanton’s squadron from England and, more, picked up the first French supply ships off Gaspé. For his

---

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Warner, *Command at Sea*, 46. Also in W.V. Anson, *Life of Lord Anson* (London, 1912), 173.

expeditious conduct he received the approbation of the Lords of the Admiralty.<sup>36</sup> On the other side of the Atlantic, far from Quebec, the final naval battle of the war, and for the command of Canada, had been fought with the French. This was Quiberon Bay. The object of British strategy was to contain the enemy in Europe on land and sea. The “Western Squadron” carried instructions to hold Brest and other western ports sealed. The blockade would trap the French warships and merchant vessels in their ports. If the enemy ventured to sea, the “Western Squadron” would fall on the enemy and thereby prevent any invasion of England or Ireland or any supplies reaching the new world. In the fading afternoon of 20 November 1759, Admiral Hawke swept down on the fleet of the French admiral Marshal de Conflans which had ventured to sea, and destroyed and scattered it, and with it French naval power for the duration of the war. Quiberon Bay sealed the fate of Canada: it certified the fall of Quebec, for it meant that the French king’s ships could not intervene where Murray’s army had been so precariously perched. By making the Bay of Biscay an English sea the fate of New France was secured.

What then was the influence of sea power upon history? The answer is that it was profound. On the other hand, command of the sea, whether absolute or of a locally exercised nature had to be maintained. It is an interesting fact, not unrelated to the theme here, that when Britain lost command of the sea, as it did at Yorktown 1781, when the French navy intervened and the Royal Navy was in adversity, that the First British Empire came to a crashing end. French command of the sea sealed the fate of the British Army in the Chesapeake.<sup>37</sup> The British government and the Admiralty under the Earl of Sandwich failed to organize a blockading squadron to control French naval power at its source. Britain found itself facing a potent combination of French, Spanish and Dutch navies.<sup>38</sup> The battle of Yorktown had untold consequences. It fractured the British Empire in America, one that had extended south from Arctic seas to the Gulf of Mexico and from Newfoundland and Labrador west to the Mississippi. Its consequences also brought important impulses to the evolution of modern Canada. Halifax and Quebec were now the anchors of British Empire. They became powerful counterweights to the rising interests of the young United States. It would take another century and more to work through the continental and maritime equipoise finally established between the legatee of the British

---

<sup>36</sup> Colville to Cleveland, 12 September and 26 October 1760, Adm. 1/482, sec. II.

<sup>37</sup> The most important date in Canadian history may be 19 October 1781. On that date General Lord Cornwallis, commanding British forces at Yorktown, Virginia, was obliged to capitulate to American and French arms. The British army subsequently evacuated Charleston and Savannah, and land operations by the British during the American war were virtually over. American independence was now practically assured, and was confirmed by treaty in 1783. British sea power kept the Americans out of the Saint Lawrence though they did come overland, unsuccessfully assaulting Quebec under Benedict Arnold.

<sup>38</sup> The naval, colonial and maritime interests of Britain’s three combatant enemies at sea in this war are described in brief compass in Jonathan R. Dull, “Mahan, Sea Power, and the War for American Independence,” *International History Review* 10,1 (February 1988): 59-67. For a fuller examination of France’s naval role and diplomatic interests, see Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774-1787* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).



Empire in America, Canada, and the United States.<sup>39</sup> The War of 1812 did not transform the equipoise as final results were to prove. How different were the circumstances the British faced a half century previous during the Seven Years War.

We return to Saunders and his reception at home. He arrived in Dublin and then London to acclaim. He had a flattering reception from the king. Pitt had already proclaimed him as among the greats who had beaten armadas. On taking his seat in the Commons on 23 January 1760 he received the thanks of the house. By April he was back at sea, blockading Cádiz while his frigates watched Toulon and harried enemy shipping, taking many prizes. He enlarged his fortune with the capture of many Spanish ships, and with the proceeds he invested mightily in land, in Yorkshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. He was installed as a Knight Commander of the Bath on 26 May 1761. Promoted to admiral in 1770 he again took up the command in the Mediterranean. From the beginning to the end of his career afloat fortune had shined on him, and progress had been steady and upward. Not all admirals had such a favourable and unscarred rise. He died in his London town house in 1775 of gout in the stomach. He was only age sixty-three.

Saunders passed from this world with a whimper rather than a bang. The naval victor of Quebec was buried privately in Westminster Abbey in December 1775. He left no issue in his marriage. His wife predeceased him. He left an annuity and household effects to “a young lady that lived with him,” Ann Clevett (Cleverley). He gave away his estates and other wealth to next of kin and to his naval friends Augustus, Lord Keppel, and Sir Hugh Palliser. He left a legacy in the records of the House of Commons. For a glint of time he served as first lord of the Admiralty in 1766. But a political shift – one of the many of that era, it should be added – put an end to that.

Horace Walpole, the political commentator and satirist, described him as “a most gallant, but weak man,” an assessment that hardly stands up against what he had accomplished at Quebec.<sup>40</sup> Then again, Walpole was not on that scene but was following British politics as he saw it. In the last analysis the greatest legacy of the British Empire may be its charts and other hydrographical contributions, and here again Saunders left his mark: Saunders organized the materials for a detailed chart of the St. Lawrence, and in April 1760 he informed the Admiralty that he was preparing to publish a great chart. He was granted permission, and the first edition subsequently appeared under his imprint. His debt to James Cook was as mighty as it was, sadly, unproclaimed.

Sir Joshua Reynolds and Richard Brompton painted his portrait – showing in each instance a powerful and formidable figure. The portrait by Brompton, part of the Northcliffe collection at the Library and Archives of Canada, bears fair comparison to that of Benjamin West showing the death of Wolfe. Whereas West featured brave Wolfe

---

<sup>39</sup> Barry Gough, “Sea Power and Canada: The Long View of History,” *Canadian Defence Quarterly* 20, 3 (Winter 1990): 41-49, and, by the same, “Sea Power and British North America: The Maritime Foundations of the Canadian State,” *British Journal of Canadian Studies* 1,1 (June 1986): 31-44 (reprinted in Barry M. Gough, *Britain, Canada and the North Pacific: Maritime Enterprise and Dominion, 1778-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2004), ch. 18).

<sup>40</sup> Walpole, *Memoirs*, 2:282; quoted in *Oxford DNB*, 32.



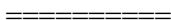
*Illustration 4: In this 1765 portrait of Vice-Admiral Sir Charles Saunders, the artist, Richard Brompton, shows Saunders pointing out how British sea power has delivered the fruits of victory, Canada. Saunders prepared and published (by approval of the Admiralty) a great chart of the River St. Lawrence. This is shown in his right hand. Note the laureled head of a soldier who looks disinterestedly away from the sea environment: his concern is the land and the territory of empire.*

*Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1990-344-1, Northcliffe Collection*

in a prostrate repose, the dying victor who has delivered Canada for the British Empire, Brompton has Saunders resplendent in full uniform of an admiral, sitting in a well-deserved chair of ease. His left arm is extended, his hand opened in welcoming, instructive gesture as if to say to us, “Here, this is what I, and Britannia, have delivered to the nation and to the Empire.” To his right is what he directs us to look at: his great map of the Gulf and River St. Lawrence leading to the key to the continent, Quebec.

The lesson is clear. Sea power – Britannia all powerful – had triumphed in a great riverine operation. And what about the Army? There is not a soldier within the frame. However, high on the left of the picture, above Saunders’s right shoulder sits the bust of a Roman, or, more correctly, a Briton in Roman guise. On his head he wears the laurels of conquest. But that is not all: he looks augustly, in unengaged manner, away from the scene. If he is not disdainful then he seems unmindful of the Saunders feat – and, more generally, of the Navy’s deliverance of the victory. It is, in all, a touching comment. Admiral Lord Fisher, arguably the most famous British admiral since Nelson, used to say that the Army was a mere projectile to be fired by the Navy. Saunders was not so cheeky or brash, but the painter of his portrait wanted to make the point that the Navy ought not to be forgotten. Everyone had heard about Wolfe. Few had heard of Saunders. The laurels of a land campaign may exceed those of a great battle at sea in the public imagination.

And what else might be said? Saunders, it is true, did not die in combat. Wolfe’s triumph in death will always command our admiration and give us pause to consider the difficulties of amphibious operations on a tidal river. No statue of Saunders stands besides that of Wolfe on the Prime Meridian at Greenwich looking down on the tidal flows of the Thames, another great river of empire. The historian Corbett put it best in describing how success could be achieved by the proper combination of the army and the navy: “For Pitt, army and navy were the blade and hilt of one weapon... It is all a most brilliant lesson of the way in which the weak army of a strong naval power can be used.”<sup>41</sup> Against a well-defended enemy-held heartland, more than five hundred miles from open seas, Saunders had delivered the army and secured the imperial aims. Taciturn and modest, quiet and capable, Saunders was a hero of Quebec and yet another example of the remarkable but often unheralded role of sea power in the annals of Canada and North America more generally.



I thank Dr Roger Sarty and Dr. Paul Adamthwaite, Dr Peter MacLeod, Professor Jonathan Dull, and several anonymous readers for their advice and help. In particular I thank Professor Michael Hadley for artistic proddings and Jenny Wraight for interpretations. My debt to the late Gerald Graham will be obvious as is my obligation to James Pritchard, Victor Suthren, Julian Gwyn and Nicholas Tracy among others. Perhaps I may be allowed one further note. When asked by a curious Englishman why Canada has produced so many prominent naval historians, I replied: “Because we live by the sea and trade by sea, and that the sea courses through our history.” What I neglected to say is that we have had excellent models to follow and fine institutes of history for our training.

---

<sup>41</sup> Corbett, *Seven Years War*, 6.

