

Reflections on Reading *Canada's Governors General at Play*

Canada's Governors General at Play. Culture and Rideau Hall from Monk to Grey.

by James Noonan

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by Jacques Monet, sj

Fr Monet, a regular contributor to CMN, is Archivist of the Jesuit Province, a former Cultural Advisor at Rideau Hall and author of many works of history including *Last Cannon Shot: A Study of French-Canadian Nationalism 1837-1850*.

Early last Saturday afternoon as I was coming towards the end of this engrossing and fascinating book, I interrupted to read John Fraser's admirable article in the *National Post* on Mme Clarkson's present tenure at Rideau Hall. "She has proven herself," he writes, "to be the most memorable and important Governor General since Georges Vanier." (I would have written that she is in that superb class that since Responsible Government has only ever been attained by Elgin, Dufferin and Vanier). He goes on to congratulate Her Excellency for reviving an office that was, he writes, "sunk deep in irrelevance, ignorance, and accelerating contempt." I disagree with this harsh assessment of our reaction to the most ancient and highest office in our land. But later, as I closed the last pages of James Noonan's remarkable study I could see how and why John Fraser come to that conclusion.

Prof. Noonan teaches Canadian literature at Carleton University in Ottawa and specialises in Canadian drama. In 1986 he was awarded the Jules and Gabrielle Léger Prize to do and direct the exhaustive research that has gone into this important scholarly publication.

Canada's Governors General at Play narrates in exhaustive detail how the enthusiasms and personal interests of the first nine Governors after Confederation marked and stimulated the growth of Canadian culture and the development of sport. The pièce de résistance is Lord Grey's great dramatic gesture in organizing and bringing to a successful conclusion the gigantic celebrations that marked the tercentenary of the founding of Quebec by Champlain, his first predecessor as Governor of Canada. In a twenty-page "Afterward" Noonan also describes

briefly the accomplishments of the sixteen successors of his first nine – from the Duke of Connaught to the Rt. Hon. Roméo Leblanc – "to point the way" he says, "for further research and to offer comparisons into the present day."

This book is a must for scholars and students. Those studying the role and significance of the Canadian Crown will find it as comprehensive a survey as has ever been done of the non-constitutional and non-political activities of Governors General, their spouses and their families. It makes the point very clearly: just as no description or history of the political process in Canada can be complete without the contribution of the Governor General so every narrative or story of Canadian music, fine art or theatre must include Rideau Hall's involvement. The same is true for a history of philanthropy and social causes, and, of course for sport: curling, fishing, horse-racing, hunting, skating, tennis.

Witness: the dozens of plays performed at Rideau Hall and written by as well as acted in by both Lord and lady Dufferin; the hundred or so concerts encouraged and attended by Princess Louise or her husband, the music often especially commissioned from Canadians; the fundraising undertaken by Lady Stanley for hospitals (especially in Ottawa) and by Lady Minto (for cottage hospitals in outlying districts across the country); the skating parties and festivals involving thousands of people in which the Lansdownes undoubtedly starred and those in which Lord Aberdeen proved himself "perhaps the best skater ever to reside at Rideau Hall", or again those in which the countess of Minto was judged to be "one of the most graceful lady skaters in the world."

Witness also the quasi-interminable list of the hundreds of awards, cups and trophies donated by the Governors General to encourage almost every type of human talent, from the Lisgar cup given the Rifle Association to the Grey Trophy for music and drama, *en passant* par the Stanley and Grey Cups.

John Noonan's descriptive narrative makes two other points I find significant. One is the participation of the Governors' children in the theatrical and sporting activities of their parents. Most of Noonan's nine Governors were young men with relatively large families. The Dufferins had seven children, two of whom were born in Canada; Lord and Lady Lansdowne brought their four young to Ottawa for the duration; of Lord Stanley's ten, half were teenagers

who spent the better part of his term in Ottawa; two of the Aberdeen's four were under ten at the beginning of their father's tenure; the youngest of the Minto's four was three and the oldest fourteen when they arrived; and of the three Grey children, the eldest would die prematurely in Ottawa.

Governors General at Play makes no secret that these youngsters shared in their parents cultural and sporting

activities. For example, in one of the Dufferin plays, put on in three performances for an audience of 200, the lead roles were held by Dufferin youngsters of ten and eight. Again the Lansdowne boys of fourteen and twelve won praise for their part in the Montreal Winter Carnival pageant; and later, in Quebec City Marjorie Aberdeen, eight, and her brother Archie, four, took leading parts in a masquerade including 250 other children. A year later, in Ottawa, the same Marjorie, 'acting in French as if she had never spoken any other language' took the part of Madeleine de Verchères in a play directed by her father.

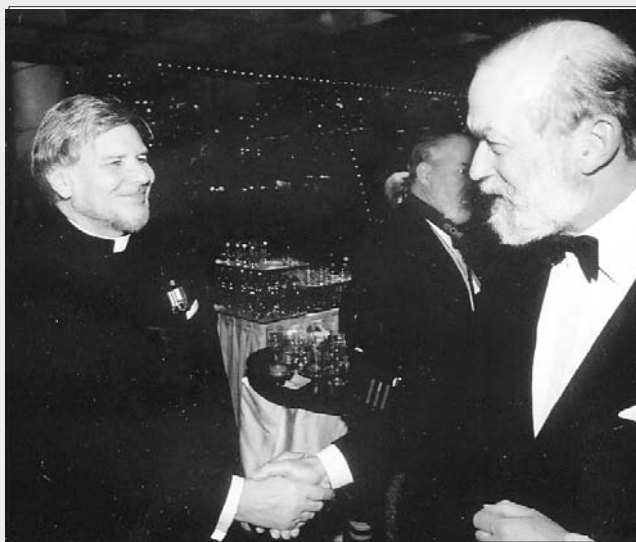
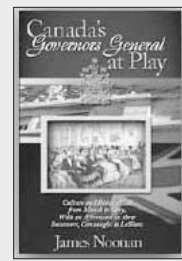
The other point I consider important is the undoubted love all the Governors had for *la vieille capitale*. All of them spent several months there every year, occupied, more usually in French, with very much the same kind of activities they carried on in Ottawa. Lord Monk, of course, returned there regularly. Lord Lorne indulged there his attraction for French plays and Princess Louise hers for concerts of classical music. Lord Stanley considered Quebec his "favourite hangout" and Lord Grey, of course, spent a year's worth of psychic and physical energy working with the Québécois to celebrate spectacularly the tercentenary of their city. The importance of youth, then, at Rideau Hall and of a complete programme of activities at the Citadel.

James Noonan's book covers in complete and minute detail 44 years of cultural and sporting governor-generalities. In the "Aftermath" he points briefly to the same kinds of activities continued in their evolution over another 89 years into our own day. Throughout, his heroes and heroines are surrounded by Canadians with whom they are exchanging regularly, working closely and playing enjoyably. As Noonan conclusively proves they make the Canadian Crown familiar, radiating generosity, kindness, and joy. In no way have they left their office, in John Fraser's words, irrelevant, ignored, or contemptible.

And yet there is no doubt that Fraser is on to something. Canadians have not been made enough aware of the Governor General's work... even though thousands if not millions, of us have been involved in activities and organizations that have been initiated and supported by Rideau Hall.

Canada's Governors General at Play makes abundantly clear that until after the Second World War the Governors' works were widely reported on, reviewed and commented upon among Canadians. Then the modern media took to ignoring them. And ignorance does not lead to appreciation.

Her Excellency Mme Clarkson's splendid sensitivity in giving expression to the values of the Canadian experience combined with the quality of her contact with people have now forced them to take notice. Her activities, her causes, her work are being reported as have those of few others of her predecessors. Thank God for that. Thank God for her. God keep her there for years to come.



Jacques Monet, sj, greets Prince Michael of Kent