

Captain George St. Vincent Whitmore: A Newly Discovered Military Artist

by EVA MAJOR-MAROTHY

In November 1987, the National Archives of Canada acquired a watercolour by Captain George St. Vincent Whitmore of the Royal Engineers, entitled *Aurora Borealis, Quebec*, (Fig. 1) and dated 1837. In addition to being an important and rare record of a spectacular phenomenon, this watercolour has also led to the identification of the artist responsible for an album of watercolours which has been in the Archives' holdings since 1970. This article relates the method by which the identity of Captain Whitmore was established by using records in the Manuscript Division and in the Cartographic and Architectural Archives Division in conjunction with records in the Documentary Art and Photography Division.

The occurrence of "northern lights" in Quebec City and in Montreal on 25 January 1837 was so extraordinary that detailed descriptions, scientific measurements, and transcendental poetry celebrating the event filled local papers. One article described a "gorgeous canopy in the heavens" which is clearly visible in the watercolour. The artist has emphasized the contrast of the lights with the monochrome of the evening landscape and the darkly silhouetted inhabitants. The viewer is looking northeast towards the St. Lawrence river along Des Carrières Street, with the monument to Wolfe and Montcalm in the Jardin des Gouverneurs on the right, and beyond, further to the right, the walls of the Citadel and Cape Diamond Redoubt.

Whitmore is a new name to add to the artistically busy period at the time of the rebellions in Lower and Upper Canada, when large numbers of troops were stationed in the Canadas, for the purposes of defence, the putting down of the rebellions, and the undertaking of new construction.¹ There were no other known works by him in public collections prior to the acquisition of this watercolour. However, research into the holdings of both the Manuscripts Division and the Cartographic and Architectural Archives Division revealed that Whitmore was in Canada from 1835 to 1842.

George St. Vincent Whitmore (1798-1851) arrived in Quebec during August 1835 with his wife, Isabella Maxwell, five children, one of whom died within a month of their arrival here, and three servants.² Born in England, he had entered the Army in 1816. As an engineer, he had studied at the Royal Military Academy in Woolwich, where an important part of his education included courses in drawing

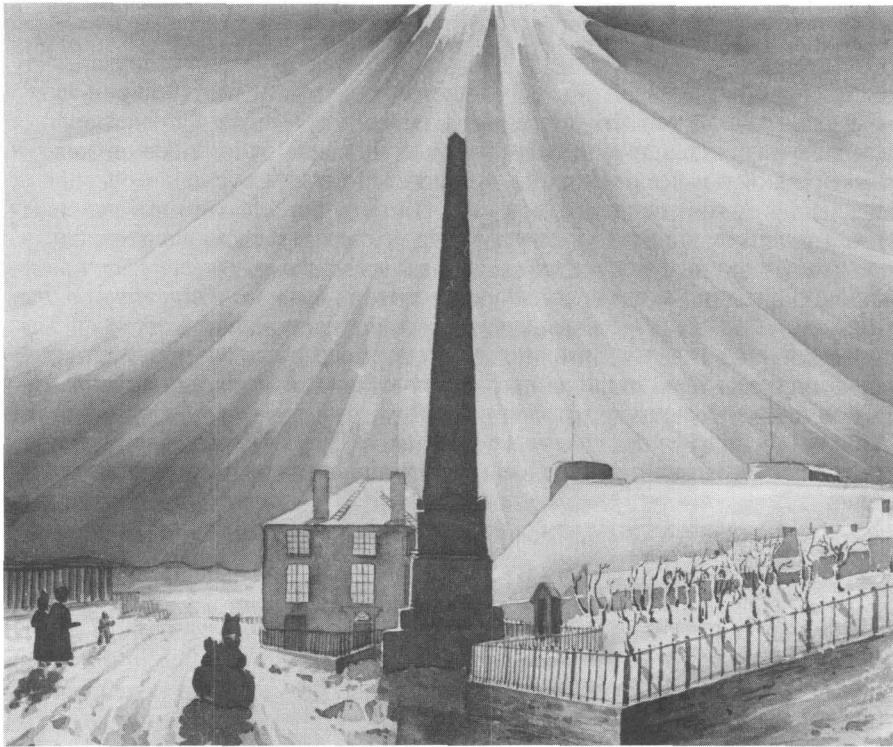


Fig. 1 Aurora Borealis, Quebec 25 January 1837. Watercolour over pencil on paper: 21.9 x 20.5 cm. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-131918.

and perspective.³ He employed this training both in his official capacity as District Engineer of Quebec, and later of Kingston, as well as for his own enjoyment, as the watercolour reveals. His official assignments during his posting to Canada included estimating the cost of new constructions and renovations, and overseeing their completion.⁴ He was also involved in a major land arbitration case in Quebec City and later in another one in Kingston.⁵ In addition, he was in charge of putting Quebec City into a state of defence after the news of the first uprising in November 1837, and commanded several militia regiments during the rebellion.⁶

A number of maps, produced under his supervision, are held in the Cartographic and Architectural Archives Division.⁷ At Kingston, Whitmore supervised the building of commissariat stores at Fort Henry in 1841-1842, and managed to complete the project at a cost of two thousand pounds under the estimate, an unusual achievement commemorated with a bronze plaque.⁸ His petition to receive remuneration for extra responsibilities shows a busy and dedicated man:

To accomplish these duties I gave up both night and day, nor was I once absent from my post... [and I had to go to] considerable expense for cariole hire during the winter 1837 and 1838. My one horse for which I was allowed forage being unequal to the work my duties required.⁹

But why were there no other examples of his work extant? With this question in mind, this author began to inspect the works executed by British military officers, which form a significant part of the National Archives' collection of documentary art. Among these, an album of twenty-four watercolours of Quebec views matched the dates of Whitmore's arrival and early residence in Canada. The attribution of the album was to unknown artist "B," because this initial is inscribed on some of the sketches. It was acquired in 1970 as part of the W.H. Coverdale Collection of Canadiana.¹⁰ A stylistic comparison of *The Aurora Borealis* with these sketches showed promising similarities. The handling of details, such as the trees, fences, and shadows in *The English Cathedral and Place d'Armes, Quebec City, Lower Canada*, (Fig. 2) or the use of the silhouetted figure, as in *Indian Lorette from the Mill, Lower Canada* (Fig. 3) suggested the same hand as had worked on *The Aurora Borealis*. The new attribution was confirmed by comparing Whitmore's handwriting, uncovered in the military records, (Fig. 4) with the extensive inscriptions on the watercolours. (Figs. 5&6) The flow of the writing, in addition to the similarity of words like *the*, *Quebec*, and *making*, of letters like the capital *B* and the *d* at the end words, confirmed the identity of Whitmore as the painter of the watercolours.

The problem remained with the initial "B." If Whitmore painted and inscribed them, why did he add the letter "B"? From the study of similar documentary art records, it is known that many of the officers and their circle of friends copied each other's pictures. For example *The English Cathedral and Place d'Armes, Quebec City, Lower Canada* (Fig. 2) is known from two other versions, one in the Royal Ontario Museum drawn by Captain Charles Wright, the other in a sketchbook by

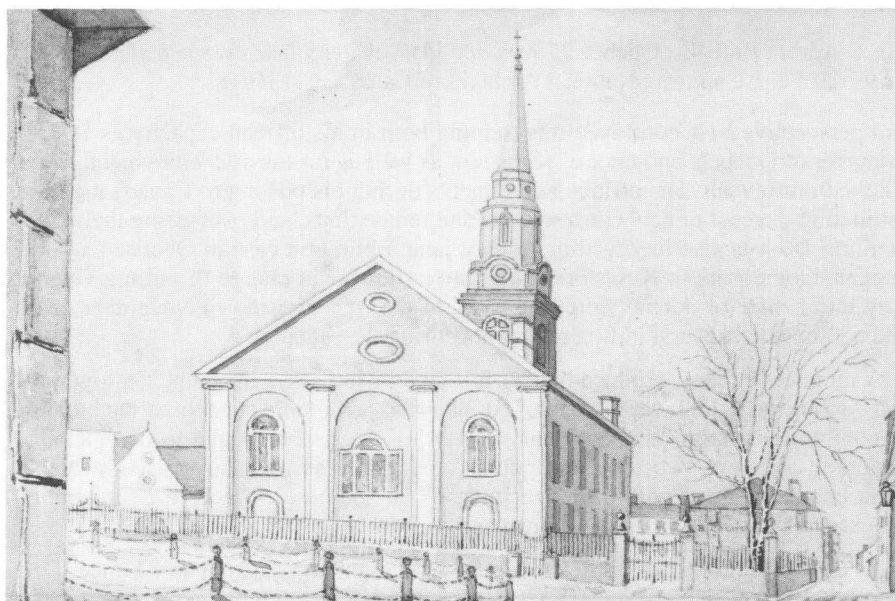


Fig. 2 The English Cathedral and Place d'Armes, Quebec ca. 1836. Watercolour over pencil on paper: 14.8 x 23.5 cm. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-40362.



Fig. 3 Indian Lorette from the Mill, Lower Canada 1836. Watercolour over pencil on paper: 14.8 x 23.5 cm. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-40367.

*This man was employed for several years in the
 Regt. of Artillery & was a good character - his consen-
 t to employment was making master
 G. Whitmore Capt.
 Quebec, 9th July 1840.*

Fig. 4 Captain George St. Vincent Whitmore's recommendation of R. Molloy, Quebec, 9 July 1840. RG 8, Series I, vol. 218, p. 120. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-134605.

*Lake Charles from the top of the hill
 on the road from Quebec.*

Fig. 5 Inscription on verso of watercolour entitled Lake St. Charles from the Top of the Hill on the Road from Quebec City, ca. 1836. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-134701.

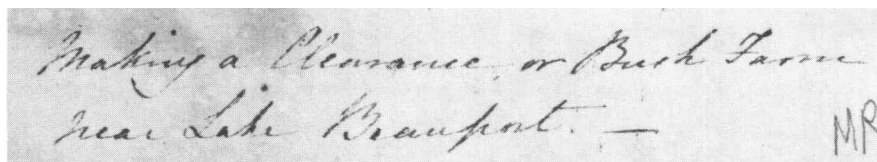


Fig. 6 Inscription on verso of watercolour entitled *Making a Clearance near Lake Beauport*, ca. 1836. Courtesy: National Archives of Canada, C-85884.

the wife of a Coldstream Guards officer, Mrs. Mary Millicent Chaplin, in the National Archives. Similarly several sketches in the "B" sketchbook are replicas of watercolours by Philip John Bainbrigge, an officer in the Royal Engineers who served in the same regiment at almost the same time as Whitmore. The initial "B" appears on some of these copies. Whitmore must have used this notation to identify the sketches he copied from Bainbrigge. A discovery of a private collection of Whitmore sketches has confirmed this hypothesis.¹¹

The other sketches in the album consist of views taken around Quebec City and the countryside depicting all the picturesque spots that the British officers, stationed in Canada, regularly visited. Among the more unique views are the *St. Charles River near the Road to Indian Lorette, Lower Canada* because it likely shows a portrait of the Whitmore family, *Shadgett's Seminary on Lake Beauport*, a boys school where Whitmore's two sons could have studied, and a scene showing a railway survey party, entitled *Preparing for a Railroad through the Woods, Lower Canada*.

Whitmore lived in Kingston for two years; however, no views by him of this area have yet been found. Since he did not sign his watercolours, these pictures — if indeed they exist — may be languishing in some collection, attributed to yet another unknown artist. Our discovery will perhaps lead to their identification.

Notes

- 1 Jim Burant, "The Military Artist and the Documentary Art Record," *Archivaria* 26 (Summer 1988), p. 44.
- 2 *Quebec Mercury*, 22 August 1835. Letter from Mrs. P. Whitmore to author, 24 March 1989.
- 3 T.W.J. Connolly, "Skeleton Memoirs," manuscript in the Royal Engineers Corps Library, Chatham.
- 4 MG 13, W.O. 55, vol. 874, pp. 7-9, 11-27, 309-310, 375-382, 385-409; RG 8, Series I, vol. 444, pp. 74, 93, 131, vol. 445, pp. 276-281, 293-298, 308-313; vol. 446, pp. 28, 32-36, 44, 46-49; vol. 448, pp. 75-78, 99, 102, 309-313; vol. 449, pp. 27, 358-359, 361; vol. 450, pp. 4-5, 71, 163-169; vol. 451, pp. 248-252.
- 5 RG 8, Series I, vol. 450, pp. 71-72, 95-96, 159-160, 260-263, 281-283, 307-309; vol. 604, pp. 214-216.
- 6 [Letter from Whitmore to Inspector General of the Fortifications, 30 May 1840.] MG 13, W.O. 55, vol. 875, p. 397; *The Quebec Almanack and British American Kalendar*, 1838, p. 210; 1839, pp. 222-3; and 1840, p. 251.
- 7 Cartographic and Architectural Archives Division: NMC 1654, 1655, 3916, 3930, 4587, 4588, 5153, 11382, 11383, 22433.
- 8 Watson Kirkconnell "Fort Henry, 1812-1914," *Queen's Quarterly* (July, August, September, 1920), p. 84.
- 9 [From Captain Whitmore to Inspector General of Fortifications, 2 September 1840.] MG 13, W.O. 55, vol. 875, pp. 397-398.
- 10 W. Martha E. Cooke, *W.H. Coverdale Collection of Canadiana: Paintings, Water-colours and Drawings* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1983), "Unknown Artist 'B' (act.1835-36), pp. 8-14.
- 11 These sketches have subsequently been donated to the National Archives of Canada.