CONCLUSION

In the course of this thesis, we have seen that the French colonial presence in North America was established over a period of nearly three hundred years. Whereas the sixteenth century was essentially a period of discovery and exploration of the 'new' continent by France, the next two hundred years witnessed the actual implantation of a French colony in the Laurentian Valley. The birth of Canada as the epicenter of what was described as New France was due to the same forces of mercantilism, colonialism, that had brought the other countries of Europe to what they inaccurately described as the 'new world'. This description was, and continues to be, inaccurate for two reasons. Firstly as the time of the European discovery of North America, the continent had already been inhabited by the Amerindians for no less than 13,000 years. Secondly, we have also seen that even for the Europeans, North America was not an altogether new continent and that it had been known to the sections of Europeans for several centuries, though they had made no serious effort to establish a permanent presence there.

Nevertheless, even if the French presence in Canada was established in the larger context of the European expansion in the Americas, there were a number of distinctive features involved in the history of Canada that set it apart from other European colonies in the continent.

The evolution of the Canadiens as a community was therefore mediated by a number of factors emanating from the social, political, military economy and religious aspects of their life in Canada.
One of the most remarkable features of the Canadian history during the French regime was the presence of an enduring alliance between the colonists and the Amerindian tribes. As we have seen, this alliance had taken shape under the leadership of Samuel de Champlain at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It was rendered possible due to a variety of factors such as the small number of colonists, the requirements of the fur trade, rivalry with other European powers and, above all, to the fact that the French colonial presence in North America was not based on the displacement of the Amerindian population. The St. Lawrence valley where Canada was situated was largely uninhabited at the time of the foundation of Québec in 1608, which made it possible for the French colonists to settle there without displacing the natives. However, the colonists had to wage an intermittent war against the Five Nations or the Iroquois who were the allies of the English and the enemies of the Hurons, Algonquins and other allied native tribes. This relationship of cooperation versus conflict with two segments of the native population had important consequences for the evolution of the French – Canadians as a community, in as much as it made them, on the one hand, amenable to the native cultural influences on account of their proximity to some native tribes and, on the other, contributed to their sense of community consciousness and group cohesiveness.

The long-drawn-out conflict with the formidable Iroquois tribes who were adept in guerilla warfare compelled the colonists to adopt the native modes of military organization and thus become truly a part of the North American cultural milieu. This was in the sharp contrast to the English colonists who throughout maintained sharp cultural boundaries with their native allies.
We have also seen that the evolution of the Canadiens as an autonomous community during the French regime was also mediated by their conflict with the English colonies. Much of the rivalry and tension between Canada and the Atlantic colonies was simply an extension of the dynamics of European politics where France and England were often placed in an adversarial position. The War of Spanish Succession, the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years War all had their origin in Europe but engulfed the European colonies in North America as well.

There were however, aspects of Anglo-French rivalry, that were at least partly dependent on the peculiarities of North American setting. Fur trade, for example, was among the most important causes of rivalry between Canada and the English colonies. The religious divide between the Catholic Canadiens and Protestant American colonists also exacerbated the conflict between the two groups.

As has been shown in the thesis, the defeat of Canada at the hands of the British was not inevitable. There is no denying that the English colonies had almost ten times more population than Canada and a proportionality larger economic base which could theoretically have been transformed into a decisive military advantage. In reality, however, the English did not have any significant military advantage vis-à-vis Canada, chiefly because the latter had a large number of Indian allies on its side and also because of the presence of the colonial militia which made the Canadiens a formidable force.

Constitution of the militia during the reign of Louis XIV was, as argued in the course of the thesis, one of the most remarkable aspects of the evolution of Frenchmen into Canadiens. The leadership of the militia was in the hands of the habitants who also constituted the bulk of its cadres. What is more important is that it was the militia and not
the regular troops deployed by France in the colony that played the dominant role in the
defense of the colony both against the English and the Iroquois. Participation in the
militia thus cultivated a sense of self-importance in the habitants and also raised their
social status. Above all, it significantly contributed to their sense of independence and
created what could appropriately be described as a corporate identity.

The social and economic conditions prevailing in Canada during the French regime had
points of convergence as well as departure from the mother country, and it was this
duality that led the colonists evolve into a community called Canadiens that cherished its
French connection and looked up to the mother country for support and sustenance and
yet clearly recognized Frenchmen as part of a different group.

The North America wilderness in which Canada was situated afforded a markedly
different life to the French colonists settled there. The frontier was an ever present
influence on the colonists that allowed them freedom, adventure and hope for better
future. The act of migrating to the ‘new world’ was in itself an adventurous as well as
hazardous exercise that brought into sharp focus the distinction between what was left
behind and what lay ahead.

In contrast to France, where social and economic structures were well established,
Canada was a fledgling society for most of the existence during the French regime. As
seen in the proceeding chapters, social, economic and political institutions as they
evolved in Canada had a distinctively North American character.

The bulk of the colonists came from the ranks of peasantry in France, while the clergy,
aristocracy and militia accounted for the rest. The ordinary peasant settlers who came to
be described as habitants had many advantages in the colony. Unlike in the case of
France, land was abundant in Canada, and an habitant could cultivate as much as land as he could clear. Moreover there were hardly any burdensome taxes on habitants, a fact which contributed to their increased levels of prosperity in comparison to France. There were no restrictions on fishing and hunting which, which again was in sharp contrast to the situation in France and which significantly contributed to the material well being of the habitants, which, in turn, made them more assertive and autonomous. Participation in the colonial militia had the same effect.

The seigneurial system as it developed in Canada was markedly different from its counterpart in France. Though along with high government officials seigneurs constituted the bulk of aristocracy in the colony, their privileges existed only in theory and not in practice, and even the captains of the militia were not recruited from their ranks. In any case, the small size of population in Canada necessitated strong community bonds, without which the community could not hope to survive in an atmosphere full of challenges and hostilities.

As argued here, the French state followed a policy of paternalism towards the colony from the reign of Louis XIV to 1763. In effect this translated into generous material support for Canada, induction of large number of French troops for the protection of the colony, encouragement to agriculture and industry and, above all, a benevolent and relatively mild form of government in Canada which evolved largely in cooperation with the ordinary colonists. Consequently the habitants were favorably disposed towards the local government and positively looked forward to France as the source of support and sustenance. Unlike in the case of the English colonies, there was on the whole no fundamental clash of interest between the evolving community and the mother country. It
is quite natural, therefore, that the community known as the Canadiens that had taken a
definite shape by the time of the Conquest remained attached to its French roots, even
though it was fully aware of its own distinctive identity.

The fur trade also played an important role in the evolution of the Canadiens as a
community. Apart from providing the colonists with an additional source of income, it
took them deeper and deeper into the continent to meet the increasing demands and thus
fueled their expansionist urges. The fur trade also helped the colonists maintain their
economic ties to France and Europe. More than anything else, perhaps, direct
involvement in the fur trade, such as on the part of Coureur de Bois and voyageurs,
resulted in close cultural interactions with the Amerindians which, in turn, went into the
making of the Canadiens as a community.

The economic development of the colony was, however, chiefly dependent on
agriculture, which, as we have seen, started as subsistence agriculture in the first half of
the seventeenth century, but had become substantially better organized by the time of the
conquest in 1763. What is even more important is that the life of the habitants revolved
around agriculture. In fact the Canadiens as a community were predominantly rural, and
agriculture supplied them with the bulk of their needs at least by the closing decades of
the French regime. In the post-Conquest period, agriculture would become even more
important in the life of the French-Canadians.

The Catholic Church played an important role in the evolution of French colonists into
Canadiens. We have seen that the church was, however, subservient to the state and most
of the time was not in a position to act independent of the political authorities of the
colony. There is hardly any substance in the accusation that Canada during the French
regime was a mission colony, as has been erroneously argued by some scholars. The missionary church did succeed in converting significant number of Indians from amongst the friendly tribes but there is reason to believe that in most cases these conversions were nominal rather than real. From the beginning of the seventeenth century to the very end of French regime, the church remained among the most important seigneurs in the colony and thus played a crucial role in the economic development of Canada. Apart from this, the church monopolized the fields of education and health care where it rendered yeomen service both to the colonial state as well as the community in general. As the moral guardian of the community, the church, especially at the higher echelons, sometimes overstepped its authority and, in the process, provoked some resentment and criticism from the habitants who were quite assertive and independent. On the whole, however, the church in Canada maintained harmonious relations with the evolving community and was in fact an integral part of the colonial reality.

The presence of a well established church helped the colonists cultivate a sense of institutional completeness and thereby contributed to their transformation into a new community called Canadiens. In the post-conquest period the Catholic Church acted as a bulwark against the cultural assimilation of the French – Canadians. On the flip side, it developed as a proxy for the state in Quebec and thus overstretched its authority – a fact that made the French-Canadians susceptible to the charge of being a priest ridden society. As we have seen, however, this was not the case in the pre-conquest era.

The conquest of Canada by the British in 1763 brought to an end the benevolent relationship between France and Canada. By this time, the transformation of Frenchmen into Canadiens had been completed and the latter had developed into a close knit cultural
community with autonomous social, economic, political and religious institutions. The Conquest, therefore, signified an unmitigated disaster for the Canadiens, as it placed them in an inferior position vis-à-vis the British. The Canadiens viewed the British as an invading force that had occupied what they had come to regard as their patrie or motherland. The attachment of the Canadiens to the soil was deep and real; they regarded themselves as the legitimate heirs of Canada and were, therefore, not prepared to surrender their distinct identity to the dictates of the Anglo-Canadians. The Conquest was only the beginning of the struggle for la survivance. The presence of French-Canadians as the second most important cultural community in Canada in the 21st century provides ample testimony to at least a qualified success of the struggle.