

*Goody Lane*

## New Landlords for Old

By LANCASTER M. GREENE

Headlines put it this way: "Feudal Rent System Is Abolished in Quebec" and "Seigniorial Tenure Ends; Land Is Now Province's."

It was true that in November, 1940, feudal dues were paid for the last time by about sixty thousand French-Canadians whose forebears had paid such rent for centuries to the landowning seigneurs.

That final payment indeed did mark the end of "seigniorial tenure," a medieval system of landholding brought in the Seventeenth Century to Canada where it survived for a hundred and fifty years after its abolition in France during the French Revolution. Seigneurs received grants from the French monarchs and parcelled out pieces of their lands in rental to settlers or tenants.

Dramatizing this system in his "French Revolution," Thomas Carlyle said: "The widow is gathering nettles for her children's dinner; a perfumed seigneur, delicately lounging in the Oeuf de Boeuf, hath an alchemy whereby he will extract from her the third nettle and call it rent."

Although this irony warned England of dangers which threatened if the aristocracy failed to remedy its submergence of a miserable lower class, the English conquerors of Canada permitted an economic anachronism to persist to the extent that descendants of French seigneurs, through 245 seignories, collected rent from about a third of Quebec's rural population until November, 1940. The rent taken for 1939 was estimated by government sources at about \$180,000.

Hundreds of years of unrest under the injustice of the private collection of ground rent finally moved the Quebec Legislature to do something about it. Analyses of the problem by Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Patrick Edward Dove, Herbert Spencer, and by followers of Ameri-

ca's Henry George were ready to bear fruit.

The man with the hoe and the man in the street at last could agree with the statement by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Archbishop of York, the Moderator of the Free Church Federal Council, and the Archbishop of Westminster that "the earth's resources should be used as God's gifts to the whole human race."

How Carlyle's perfumed seigneur must have chuckled as the Quebec lawmakers discussed the means to do away with the feudal rent system! "A little knowledge" was not enough as these good men went about illustrating the saying that a people will always get the worst government they will tolerate, or no better than the average man can understand.

The mountain labored and brought forth the purchase of the privilege of collecting these rents by the Province of Quebec for a reported sum of about \$3,200,000.

This is 17½ times the 1939 rent, which it thus capitalizes at 55½ per cent. Is there any real estate which can be sold at 17½ times the rent? It is more likely that the price will have to be three to ten times the rent to attract buyers.

"Quebec will pay cash for the feudal rents," the Government spokesmen said. "Then the sellers may do as they will with the \$3,200,000 they receive. They may buy labor products, or services, or purchase other lands."

While this was technically correct, the Province of Quebec did not have the \$3,200,000 in cash, but has raised it as needed in the form of borrowing from a banking group. So far the group has advanced \$2,000,000 and a balance of \$1,000,000 remains to be paid. When fully paid, the bank loans are to be refunded by a bond issue.

In effect, Quebec will be giving the holders of feudal seignories its bonds, or promises to collect taxes, in the amount of \$3,000,000 plus interest. It becomes clear that the seigneurs are really to be paid with a first lien on the production of each person in Quebec instead of on the production of the sixty thousand farmers who had paid rent to the feudal heirs.

This is a simpler, easier, less hand-soiling way of collecting a return than that of exacting rent from each farmer.

But what of the farmers who have been rescued from the takings by seigniorial heirs? Do they have more to spend for dresses, second-hand cars and radios? Why no, for they must continue to pay the rent, although now to the Province. They are said to owe it to themselves and thus to bear no burden.

But the farmer is too close to production to be deceived by those who deal only in pieces of paper, in claims on production. He knows very well that a collector is still coming around for the rent. By way of explanation the Government says:

"Some of this goes toward your purchase of the right to collect your rent for yourself. If you keep up your payments for twenty-five to fifty years, you may own the land yourself and become a gnarled edition of the powdered seigneur in a small way. You or your heirs may then cease to produce to the extent you can charge others for the privilege, that of getting at the earth."

What a philosophical smile must play over the aristocratic features of Carlyle's seigneur as he notes that an ancient wrong has been righted and the "Feudal Rent System is Abolished in Quebec!"

The citizens of Quebec may well paraphrase the words of Pyrrhus and say: "A few more such victories for 'Reform' and we are bankrupt."