

ESTABLISHING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY: EARLY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS

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As Antoine Sirois observed in 1989 in his introduction to an anthology of articles on the Eastern Townships published by the Université de Sherbrooke: “Plusieurs monographies ont été rédigées à ce jour sur Sherbrooke et les Cantons de l’Est historiques, région comprise entre le Richelieu et la Chaudière, mais les études étaient plutôt parcellaires.”¹ Charged ten years earlier with curating a survey exhibition of historic Eastern Townships art for the Galerie d’art du Centre culturel at the Université de Sherbrooke, I found virtually no publications available that dealt with early regional artistic production. The resulting exhibition and catalogue text were necessarily cobbled together from fragmentary, mostly primary material, including historical and social documents, newspaper reports, artists’ papers, personal accounts, and extant art works found in a wide variety of public and private Canadian collections.² The history of art in the Eastern Townships posited in that catalogue served, at best, to define the main lines of development and to highlight particular artistic accomplishments connected with this colonial community up to the arbitrary date of 1950.³ The research process raised more questions than answers, however. Chief among the questions was the original need for a regional history of art and, more to the present point, how to define art in regional terms.

What constitutes Eastern Townships’ art? As in most colonial art histories the definition has been broadened to include all those early images of the region and its people produced by the many peripatetic, artistically-inclined civil servants and artist-tourists from other parts of the country and abroad who wandered (and “wondered”) through. In accepting a definition of regional identity one must acknowledge, in the first place, the constructed, and symbolic, nature of what is accepted as a “community.”

“Community [...] seems to imply simultaneously both similarity and difference. The word thus expresses a relational idea : the opposition of one community to others or to its other social entities. Indeed...the use of the word is only occasioned by the desire or need to express such a distinction [...]. [The] consciousness of community is encapsulated in its boundaries, boundaries which are themselves largely constituted by people in interaction.”⁴

In the historic construction of an identity for the community of the Eastern Townships, through the establishment of physical, psychological, and cultural boundaries, the pictorial arts may be seen to have made a distinct contribution. It is this aspect of regional art history that I wish to consider here.

A survey of Eastern Townships views in extant paintings, drawings and prints produced within the first century of the opening to permanent settlement of this sector of modern-day Quebec offers some insight into the colonial experience and the collective aspirations of early settlers, most of British, American, and, in later years, French-Canadian origin, who took up residence in this region after 1791. From the early topographical studies produced by the government-sponsored surveyor, Joseph Bouchette (1774–1841), through the independent, naturalistic interpretations of local scenery and people by Stanbridge-born Allan Edson, one may trace the layered process of coming to physical, emotional, and intellectual terms with what appeared initially to colonial settlers as a forbidding foreign environment.

Colonial Dreams: Taming the Wilderness

The metamorphosis of the Eastern Townships from a forested wilderness to a modern, industrialised community repeats a general pattern of colonial development within the British North American colonies. That the process of civilising the land and establishing permanent communities began here so much later than in other parts of Quebec — more than two hundred years after the first French settlements along the St. Lawrence River — brought certain regional distinctions. It was not until 1791, with the Constitutional Act, that this geographic territory, long the hunting grounds of various aboriginal groups and a strategic military buffer zone, was legally “redefined” as part of the colony of Lower Canada. But it was really only with the end of the War of 1812 and resulting border peace that the permanent settlement of this untouched natural district was actively encouraged and a government-authorised project of inhabitation, cultivation, and resource exploitation was embarked upon.

A long-term project of dispossession as much as one of the possession of new lands, it involved the takeover and physical transformation of the traditional hunting territories of resident Abenakis by non-native colonists. As wilderness gave way to farmlands, networks of roadways, open mining sites, and new urban communities, the aboriginal population slipped into the margins of an evolving definition of Eastern Townships society. This original boundary declaration between native and non-native communities is evident in colonial pictorial representations by the absence, or fringe-existence, of aboriginal figures.⁵

In the early history of colonial settlement in the Eastern Townships, land was the prized commodity attracting the first wave of freehold landowners. Contrary to the attitudes towards the land of the region's aboriginal inhabitants, for Loyalists and other settlers of European ancestry, its value was more relative than inherent, dependant upon its ability to be developed in a manner capable of supporting a society modelled after the parent culture. The untamed, natural environment first encountered by new immigrants remained for many years a threatening and vaguely known one. It was only through direct experience over time and accumulated knowledge of regional realities, coupled with active efforts to bring order to the wilderness through land clearance, cultivation and the construction of roads, bridges, dams, and other such civilising amenities, that a comfortable level of familiar co-existence with the new environment was attained.

It is a vision of a land of promise and progress that the earliest pictorial records of the region convey. Joseph Bouchette, Surveyor General of British North America and trained topographical artist, produced the first extant representations of Eastern Townships sites. Created within the context of a general inspection tour of the region undertaken in 1827, on orders from Governor General Dalhousie, to report on the progress of colonisation in the new Quebec townships, they focus, not surprisingly, on scenes of more advanced development, as found, for example, at Kilborn's Mills (cat. 1). Reflecting colonial concerns and notions of progress, Bouchette's view ignores the greater reality of still uncut wilderness, here only hinted at in the far distant mountain peaks and forest fringe, to focus on a swath of pruned countryside anchored by a clearly navigable road and bordering cluster of houses. Reproduced as a lithograph illustrating Bouchette's seminal 1831 publication *The British Dominions in North America*, this image reached a broad audience.⁶ Such illustrations, in concert with published descriptive accounts, early



Figure 1

Joseph, or Robert Shore Milnes, Bouchette. Sherbrooke, Eastern Townships, Lower Canada. Principal Station of the British American Land Company. 1836. Hand-coloured lithograph. Published in British American Land Company Views in Lower Canada (W. Day, 1836).

Musée du Québec (A-69.496-e)

helped to define the Eastern Townships as a land of plentiful, untapped resources, yet also a civilised site for the new homesteader and entrepreneur. They share with early surveyor maps and charts the intention to increase and disseminate information about the new lands to prospective landowners. The power of pictures to attract new settlers and entrepreneurs to the area was early recognised and exploited by government as well as private land promoters. In 1836, the British American Land Company, a chartered land agency based in Sherbrooke, published a series of prints after drawings by Joseph Bouchette and his son Robert Shore Milnes (1805–1879). If factually-based, the promotional nature of these images is undeniable in their selective representation of developed communities featuring a healthy mix of homes, churches, and productive mills (fig. 1).

In an era when the efforts of immigrants to the Eastern Townships focussed on transforming a seemingly chaotic hinterland into a hospitable environment of farmlands and orderly settlements, there was little aesthetic appreciation for the more sublime aspects of the

regional landscape. The preference, one encouraged by colonial authorities and land developers, was for optimistic images of a tamed landscape, in counterpoint to the harsher realities of weather, geography, and the other menacing experiences of pioneer life. It was with the establishment of infrastructures necessary for the growth and prosperity of communities that a change in attitude towards the immediate natural environment occurred. Only from the less perilous prospects of cleared and cultivated lands, permanent homes, roads, functioning mills, factories, schools, and churches, did the surrounding wilderness begin to assume a less menacing visage.

Land of Beauty: Distinguishing Spaces

Settlement of the Eastern Townships occurred at different rates in different parts of the district, so that even as residents of regional town centres, above all Sherbrooke, were beginning to enjoy the utilitarian, social and cultural amenities of an urban lifestyle, near neighbours were still at the pioneer stage of land clearance and housing construction. By the Act of Union in 1840, however, the state of regional development was sufficiently advanced that the Eastern Townships had achieved its own political identity within the Assembly of Lower Canada (now Canada East) and the Union parliament.⁷ Through the work of artists the region also began at this time to distinguish itself in public consciousness on its aesthetic merits: as a site of uniquely beautiful natural scenery.

The period of early settlement of the Lower Canada townships coincided with the popularisation of the aesthetic philosophy of the picturesque and sublime. Formulated in Britain in the late eighteenth century, it provided an intellectual basis for appreciating nature's more unruly conditions and moods. British artist William Henry Bartlett (1809–54), who travelled through the Eastern Townships during a second trip to the Canadas in 1838, was the first to interpret regional scenes according to its precepts. Many of the field sketches he made during this trip were reproduced in engraved form in *Canadian Scenery*, published in London, England, in 1842. In his pictures of local communities, such as *View of Georgeville* (cat. 3), the pioneer settlement is portrayed as part of a larger physical environment; the picturesque comforts of the human community contrasted with the broad lake and soaring mountain peaks. It projects an expanded, and to some extent more harmonious, conception of man and his natural environment, although one in which the natural world remains a distanced object of awe.

Bartlett was the first to visually draw attention to the natural

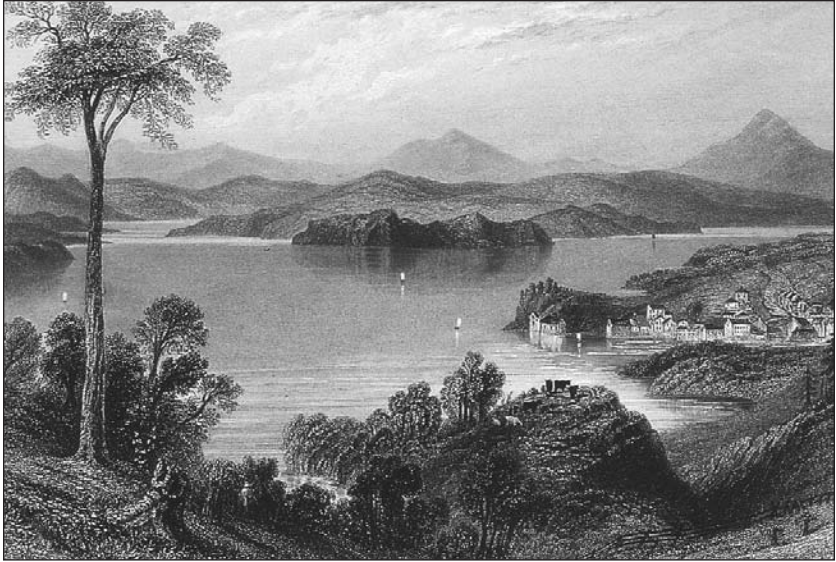


Figure 2

William Henry Bartlett. Lake Memphremagog (Near Georgeville) 1838/42.

Steel engraving. Charles James Armytage, engraver. Published in N.P. Willis Canadian Scenery (London: James & Virtue, 1842). Mackinnon Collection of Canadiana, Bishop's University Library.

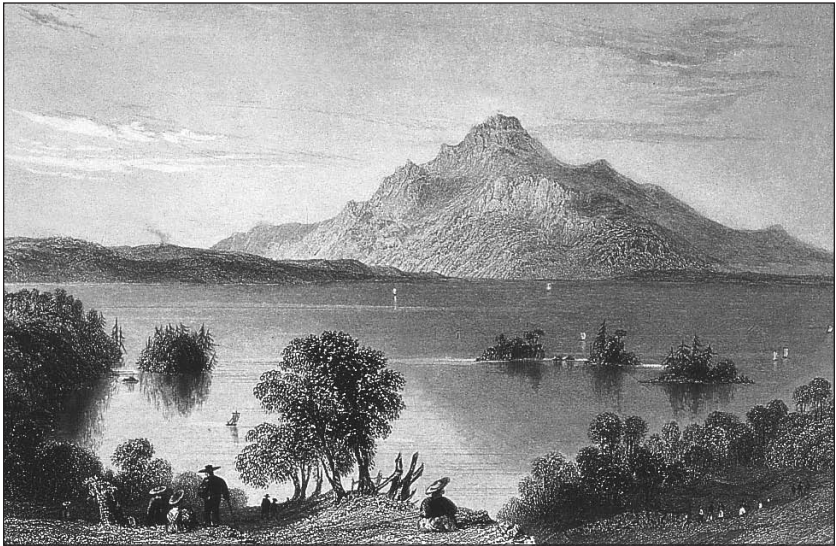


Figure 3

William Henry Bartlett. Orford Mountain, Eastern Townships. 1838/42.

Steel engraving. William Mossman, engraver. Published in N.P. Willis Canadian Scenery (London: James & Virtue, 1842). Mackinnon Collection of Canadiana, Bishop's University Library.

beauty of such Eastern Townships sites as Lake Memphremagog and Mount Orford (figs. 2 & 3). Rendered in a romantic manner originally applied to scenes of the English Lake District, his pictures of these subjects highlight the world-class nature of such local scenery. Popularly available in print form and much imitated by amateur artists,⁸ Bartlett's images may be seen to participate in the process of regional self-definition. The delineation of the special features of the Eastern Townships' landscape served at once to unite in common experience, as they helped distinguish, the local community from the greater provincial, even global, context. Indeed, by mid-century, the region's unique topography and attendant natural attributes were a source of increasing attraction to Canadian and foreign sportsmen and summer excursionists, turning its own lake districts into major vacation destinations.

It was now possible to relate to the regional environment not only as a productive natural resource or an object of beauty for contemplation from a distant prospect, but also as a pleasurable site for popular leisure activities: fishing, hunting, boating and hiking. The introduction of new railroads through the countryside, notably the Grand Trunk Line between Montreal and Portland, and the upgrading of water transportation to steam propulsion helped facilitate and promote tourism. Hotels and related amenities for travellers proliferated. For sportsmen and urban dwellers escaping the summer heat, Lake Memphremagog became a favourite holiday spot. Its growing stature in public consciousness finds expression in the paintings of Cornelius Krieghoff (1815–72). An avid sportsman in his own right, Krieghoff first came to the area about 1858–59, probably with a party of fellow anglers from Quebec City, where he was then living. Between 1859 and 1861 he painted, most notably, four autumn views of the lake dominated by Owl's Head Mountain (cat. 15). Though these pictures are relatively small in format, the subject assumes a larger-than-life physical and sublime spiritual presence when seen through the romanticising eyes of Krieghoff. The mountain gains in monumentality through conscious exaggeration of its form, emphasising its conical shape. And as viewed from a near prospect – we approach like the foreground boat – it appears proportionally larger in relation to the surrounding lake, which has been deliberately cropped. The portentous, pre-, or post-storm, weather conditions, creating dramatic contrasts of natural light and shadow, contribute to a sense of some underlying spiritual presence, a quality that takes Krieghoff's interpretation beyond the material descriptions of early topographical artists, not to mention contem-

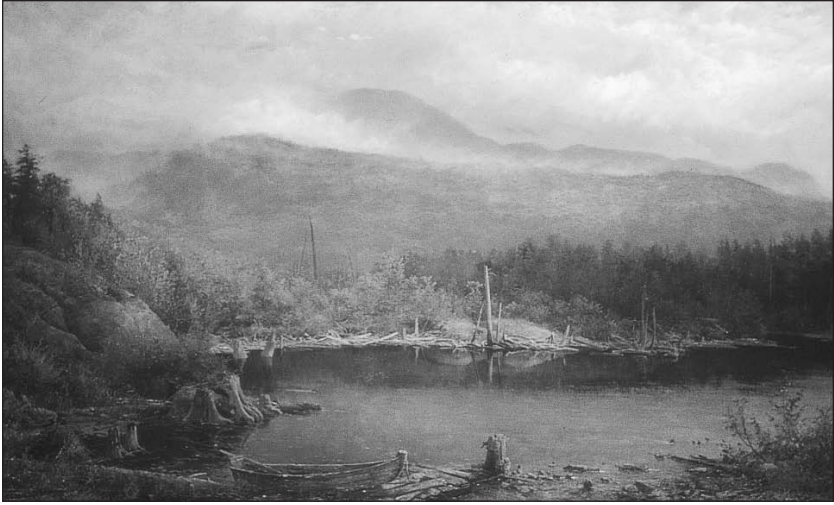


Figure 4

Allan Aaron Edson. *Mount Orford, Morning*. 1870.

Oil on canvas. 91.6 x 152.8 cm. National Gallery of Canada (1398).

porary illustrations in the popular press and on tourist broadsheets.

Interest in such Eastern Townships landscape subjects, rendered in ever larger pictorial formats and with growing attention to atmospheric effect, increased among younger Canadian artists, including two who were residents of the region: John A. Fraser (1838–98) and Allan Aaron Edson (1846–88). Scottish-born Fraser lived in Stanstead for two years before moving to Montreal in 1860, while Edson was born and raised in Stanbridge, where he painted some of his first pictures in the 1860s.⁹ Edson's 1870 canvas *Morning, Mount Orford* (fig. 4) constitutes an early masterpiece and stands among the best interpretations of the regional landscape. This luminous rendering of Mount Orford, cloaked in a pale morning mist, enters the realm of poetry. Uninhabited, motionless, and permeated by a moistly translucent daylight seemingly bursting from behind an unseen cloud, this landscape transcends empirical fact, assuming metaphysical significance as a form of earthly paradise. Exploiting the lessons of contemporary photography, most notably as expressed in the work of Montreal photographer William Notman, Edson invests his landscape with his own romantic feelings for his native land. The evocative power of the Lake Memphremagog landscape is no less apparent in John Fraser's 1873 canvas *September Afternoon, Eastern Townships* (fig. 5), although a less intimate interpretation. The central, stage-like positioning of the mountain concentrates the eye on

its mammoth form. Its looming, primordial presence, combined with the biblically allusive human figures and roaming sheep in the foreground, equally infuses it with new metaphorical meaning. Sent to the Philadelphia Bicentennial Exhibition of 1876, this canvas helped bring international attention to the singular beauties of this regional scenery. For Fraser, who travelled extensively throughout the newly confederated Dominion of Canada painting various countrysides, the landscape of southern Quebec formed but a part of an ambitious, national artistic project.¹⁰

The untouched natural landscapes of the Eastern Townships captured in the art of native son Allan Edson, by Fraser, and other leading Canadian artists of their day, among them Lucius O'Brien (1832–99) and Henry Sandham (1842–1910),¹¹ were viewed and enjoyed by an ever widening national audience, thanks to their appearance in public exhibitions, including those of the Art Association of Montreal, Royal Canadian Academy of Art, and Ontario Society of Artists. As it dominated late nineteenth-century Canadian art circles, the perception of the Eastern Townships as the site of mythically-beautiful rural scenery also contributed to an emerging regional consciousness of the unique environmental attributes that served to distinguish this community from its provincial neighbours. Even so, it was not the only defining vision of this rapidly developing region then in circulation. Alternate representations of contemporary urban life are, however, seldom to be found among the



Figure 5

*John A. Fraser. September Afternoon, Eastern Townships. 1873.
Oil on canvas. 78.5 x 131.3 cm. National Gallery of Canada (18159).*

pictures sent to Canadian fine art exhibitions at this time. For these, one must look to more popular modes of expression.

Town and Country: Defining Cultures

The years from 1870 to 1914 were ones of exponential growth within the Townships during which time more than forty municipalities were incorporated.¹² This reality finds expression in a proliferation of mass-distributed, printed town views that, among other purposes, promoted the Eastern Townships as a modern centre of commerce and its municipalities as competitive equals to other Canadian communities.¹³ Sherbrooke, the leading regional centre, was then, in fact, a direct rival to Quebec City and Trois-Rivières in the lumber industry. Panoramic and “bird’s-eye” views, charting the material progress of an entire community, became popular forms of visual record in the late nineteenth century. Local publications, featuring pictures by regional residents, equally began to appear in this period. One notable early example is *Hunter’s Eastern Townships Scenery*, first printed in 1860 and illustrated with lithographs after drawings by Stanstead resident William Stuart Hunter (1823–94). Hunter’s view of the mountainous panorama visible from the front steps of his home (cat. 5) stands in telling counterpoint to Bartlett’s 1838 rendering of Georgeville (cat. 3), or even Bouchette’s view of Kilborn’s Mills (cat.1). The sense of classical order and bounded nature found in Hunter’s picture, if echoing Bouchette’s tidy colonial view, bespeaks a new Victorian assurance in the ability of man to contain natural forces and the consequential psychological ease with which local residents could now live within their natural environment.

The economic and attendant social growth of the Eastern Townships as a significant regional centre within the larger provincial and national context brought a new self-confidence accompanied by increased awareness of the multifarious areas of potential regional expression. The last half of the century witnessed a significant demographic shift as a result of the influx of successive groups of French-Canadian settlers, many concentrated in the previously under-populated northern townships, notably the region known today as les Bois-Francs. By the late 1800s the French-speaking (and Catholic) population had numerically outpaced the descendants of early English-speaking (and Protestant) settlers.¹⁴ The cultural diversification this brought to the region, and to local art forms, including literature, music, theatre, as well as the visual arts, significantly broadened the intellectual boundaries defining the community of the Eastern Townships.

If the early image of this district of Quebec, as rendered in pictures, was principally shaped by visiting artists, the groundwork was nonetheless slowly being laid for the development of a regionally-centred arts community, one distinguished from the major provincial centres of Montreal and Quebec City. Local interest in the visual arts was given a boost after 1850 through the progressive efforts of such notable regional residents as John Carpenter Baker and Samuel F. Morey, both businessmen and passionate about art.¹⁵ Baker accumulated a significant picture collection housed in a gallery atop his Stanbridge East home.¹⁶ It was through the subsidised study and copying of art works in this private collection that both Allan Edson and Charles Wyatt Eaton (1849–96), another local boy who went on to become an internationally-recognised artist,¹⁷ obtained their earliest instruction and knowledge of art. Counterbalancing Baker's private patronage, Samuel Morey established the first public art gallery in the district: Morey's Art and Library Building opened in 1886 in Sherbrooke, then, as today, the leading regional cultural centre.

From early colonial days the Eastern Townships have, of course, been home to many creative individuals working in a variety of media. The domestic context within which much of this work, especially by women, was produced undoubtedly contributed to a personal sense of community. However, for many years local artistic activity was largely an isolated affair, the products of which were little known outside the creator's family or immediate social circle.¹⁸ In cultural matters standards were long set by larger urban centres located outside regional boundaries, above all in Montreal, which took its own cues from Europe. This begins to change in the post-Confederation era with the development of local facilities where art could be taught and publicly displayed. While native-born artists of Allan Edson and Wyatt Eaton's generation still had to go outside their home communities for advanced art study, and to practice their profession, it was within their native region that they were first exposed to art, and so inspired to pursue an artistic career. Many locally-born artists, from across the Eastern Townships, would soon follow them, each of whom in their individual way would contribute to regional identity.

RÉSUMÉ

Vers un sens d'appartenance : les premiers paysages des Cantons de l'Est

En 1980, quand Virginia Baker entreprend de monter, pour le compte de la Galerie d'art du Centre culturel de l'Université de Sherbrooke, une exposition-survol de l'art historique des Cantons de l'Est, il n'existe à peu près rien de publié sur les débuts de la production artistique dans la région. Son exploration d'une multitude de sources disparates et parcellaires lui a permis de produire un document qui figure toujours comme document de base de l'histoire de l'art dans la région. Aujourd'hui, dans un article où elle s'efforce de faire ressortir ce qui caractérise l'œuvre des principaux artistes qui ont marqué ici les débuts de l'histoire de l'art, elle en vient à la conclusion que si les premières images ont été produites par des visiteurs, ceux-ci ont préparé le terrain pour une collectivité artistique régionaliste qui se distingue des principaux centres provinciaux de Montréal et Québec. Dès ses débuts, la région a accueilli de nombreux créateurs et le contexte familial dans lequel ils produisaient a certainement créé un sens d'appartenance. Leur ont succédé des artistes issus du milieu, de cultures différentes, qui chacun à leur façon ont contribué à l'identité régionale.

NOTES

- 1 *Les Cantons de l'Est: Aspects géographiques, politiques, socio-économiques et culturels* (Sherbrooke, Qué.: Les Éditions de l'Université de Sherbrooke, 1989), n.p.
- 2 Victoria Baker *L'art des Cantons de l'Est, 1800-1950* (exhibition catalogue) Galerie d'art du Centre culturel, Université de Sherbrooke, 1980.
- 3 The circumscribed limits of this catalogue essay, linked as it was to a selected presentation of the visual culture of the Eastern Townships' settler community, did not permit a most necessary consideration of the experiences and modes of expression of the longer-established aboriginal population of the region. This remains a subject of ongoing scholarly investigation.
- 4 Antony P. Cohen. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), 12-13.
- 5 For a more in-depth discussion of this subject see Gillian Poulter, "Representation as Colonial Rhetoric: The Image of 'the Native' and 'the habitant' in the Formation of Colonial Identities in Early

- Nineteenth-Century Lower Canada" *Journal of Canadian Art History / Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien*. Vol. XVI, no. 1 (1994), 11–25.
- 6 This was an expanded and revised edition of Bouchette's 1815 book, *A Topographical Description of the Province of Lower Canada*.
 - 7 See Jacques Gagnon, "Petite histoire politique des Cantons de l'Est" in *Les Cantons de l'Est: Aspects géographiques, politiques, socio-économiques et culturels* (Sherbrooke, Qué. : Les Éditions de l'Université de Sherbrooke, 1989), 155–165.
 - 8 Among other popular interpretations, prints inspired by Bartlett's work were widely distributed in the 1860s by the New York firm of Currier & Ives.
 - 9 The National Gallery of Canada owns a small oil on board study from about 1864 depicting the Pike River, near Stanbridge.
 - 10 See Dennis Reid, *Our Own Country Canada: Being An Account of the National Aspirations of the Principal Landscape Artists in Montreal and Toronto, 1860–1890*. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, National Gallery of Canada, 1979).
 - 11 Some of these pictures received a wider viewing through their reproduction in national periodical publications, notably *Canadian Illustrated News* and *L'Opinion publique*. For example, Sandham's views of Orford Mountain, Lake Memphremagog and Owl's Head, Lake Memphremagog were featured in the 26 September 1874 issue of *CIN*. Here too the work of local amateur artists was sometimes also seen, as was the case with Dr. George Bompas, whose *View of Lake Nicolet, from the N.E.* (cat. 11) was illustrated in the *CIN* on 2 March 1872, or another Drummondville native, Jane Anne Cook.
 - 12 *op. cit.*, Jacques Gagnon, 164.
 - 13 These townscapes were often reproduced in popular publications, notably *Belden's Illustrated Atlas of the Dominion of Canada* (1881). Another Belden series, *Bird's-Eye Views* (1881), included views of Bedford, Coaticook, Waterloo, Lennoxville, Derby Line-Rock Island, and Sherbrooke.
 - 14 See J.I. Little, *Ethno-Cultural Transition and Regional Identity in the Eastern Townships of Quebec*. Canadian Historical Society, Booklet No.13 (Ottawa, 1989).
 - 15 J.C. Baker was a banker and bank-owner, while S.F. Morey worked as an inspector for the Eastern Townships Bank.
 - 16 Situated adjacent to Gilmour's (formerly Baker's) Bank, J.C. Baker's residence was pictured in *Belden's Illustrated Atlas of the Dominion of Canada*, published in 1881.

- 17 Eaton was born in Philipsburg, a few kilometers south of Stanbridge.
- 18 For example, one of the earliest extant landscape views by a regional resident is a tiny watercolour study of Philip Henry Gosse's farm at Compton, painted in September 1837 by Gosse himself. It remains, however, part of his personal papers housed in the National Archives of Canada. See *L'art des Cantons de l'Est, 1800–1950*, cat. no. 6.