**The *Prudent* and *Bienfaisant* action at Louisbourg, 26 July 1758**

In the 18th-century British and French contest for domination of Canada, the French fortress town of Louisbourg controlled access to the St Lawrence River, the highway to the interior including the key French colonial cities of Quebec and Montreal. The Royal Navy, operating with New England militia, had taken Louisbourg in 1745 during the War of the Austrian Succession, but it was returned to France in the concluding peace of 1748.

During the Seven Years War (1756–63) its recapture was prerequisite to the amphibious assault up the St Lawrence that resulted in Wolfe taking Quebec in 1759 and Canada remaining British when the war ended. (All France retained, as today, were the two small islands comprising St Pierre et Miquelon, off the southern tip of Newfoundland).

In June 1758 General Jeffrey Amherst’s army laid siege to Louisbourg and the French navy progressively withdrew from the harbour. Five French ships of the line were still there in July when one blew up after Amherst’s artillery set it on fire and the heat set fire to the sails of two more, destroying them as well.

The British admiral on the station, Edward Boscawen, then saw opportunity to eliminate the other two, the Prudent (74 guns) and Bienfaisant (64). About 600 men, in two cutting-out boat parties under Commanders John Laforey of the *Hunter* (10) and George Balfour of the *Aetna* (16) went in on the night of 25–26 July, avoiding detection from the outer defences in the darkness and fog, at the same time as Amherst’s artillery kept up a distracting fire on the landward fortifications.

Though eventually spotted and fired on by the French ships’ sentries, Laforey’s men quickly took the *Prudent* and Balfour’s the *Bienfaisant*, with total British loss of seven dead and nine wounded. As the British boats started towing the two captured ships away, French shore guns opened fire on them. In the confusion the *Prudent* ran aground, where the British set it on fire to prevent recapture. Balfour’s boats at the same time succeeded in towing *Bienfaisant* out of range to the north-east corner of the harbour.

Boscawen’s squadron entering the harbour the following day and, with the town walls about to be breached from landward, the loss of *Prudent* and *Bienfaisant*, plus the other three ships burnt, prompted the rapid surrender of Louisbourg. Immediate recognition to key personnel saw Boscawen promote Balfour and Laforey to post-captain, the former as commander of the captured *Bienfaisant* and the latter to the small frigate *Echo* (24). Balfour’s active service continued to the end of the War of American Independence in 1783: he died as a retired rear-admiral in 1794. Laforey, a baronet from 1789, was still serving as Admiral of the Blue at his death in 1796.

**Recorded exhibited oil paintings of the incident**

By Richard Paton:

1. **1763,** Society of Artists (no. 88): ‘The burning of a French ship of war and towing away another by the boats of Admiral Boscawen's fleet in the night, and under cover of a fog.’

This is known in two versions, both now in Canada (Royal Ontario Museum and Art Gallery of Nova Scotia). One was engraved by Pierre-Charles Canot and exh. RA 1770 (no. 27) as ‘The Burning the Prudent and the towing off the Bienfaisant [sic] in Louisbourgh harbour on 26th July 1758’. Published in 1771; copies in BM (<https://bit.ly/3gQUIpy>), NMM etc. Given the seven-year time lag between exhibition and engraving, one is likely to be the exhibited version and the other possibly done as a copy for engraving.

1. **1779**, Royal Academy (no. 232): 'A view of the burning of the Prudent of 74 guns in Louisburg harbour, in the island of Cape Breton, and of cutting out the Bienfaisant of 64 guns, and towing her into the North harbour, which was performed by the boats of Admiral Boscawen's fleet under the command of Captains Laforey and Balfour.'

This may be either the large picture at Derby (acq. no. 1950-109 attributed to Paton) or the rather different one on the National Libraries and Archives of Canada.

By Robert Wilkins c.1740–c.1790

1. **1769**, Free Society of Artists (no. 234): 'The boats of the fleet under the command of Admiral Boscawen burning the Prudent, and towing off the Bienfaisant, two French ships of war in the harbour of Louisbourg'
2. **1770**, Free Society… (no. 264): 'The burning the French ship [sic] in the harbour of Louisbourgh by Admiral Boscawen'.
3. **1772**, Free Society… (no. 220); 'The burning the Prudent [sic] in the harbour of Louisbourgh'  
     
   Two non-specific marine conflagrations – which appear to have been a Wilkins speciality– were also shown by him at the Free Society:  
   1771, (no. 275): 'A ship on fire, in a seaport [by moonlight]'  
   1778, (no. 140): 'A ship on fire in the harbour'

**Existing identified paintings**

**Derby Museums and Art Gallery**

1. *Richard Paton (attributed to) as ‘The Siege of Louisbourg’, 1004 x 1732 mm (39½ x 68¼ in.), purchased from ‘Mrs Moncton’, 1950 (acq. no. 1950–109). The seller was presumably the widow of George E. E. Monckton of Bacton Manor, Hereford, who owned it in 1936 according to information on the back. He in turn seems to have been descended from Edward Monckton, half-brother of Lt-General Robert Monckton (1726–82), Wolfe’s second-in-command at Quebec in 1759 and a significant figure in Canada at that period.*

Shows the town in the far left; in the middle-distance, boats tow the *Bienfaisant* out in port-bow view (centre); at right centre, *Prudent* lies aground in stern view, listing to port and ablaze; in the right foreground, a circular stone lighthouse tower (unlit) built on a rocky eminence at the harbour entrance; outside it, across the bottom of the canvas, British boats from *Prudent* escape.

1. *(i) William Marlow (acc. Michael Liversidge attribution) as ‘A Ship on Fire’, 368 x 521 mm (14½ x 20½ in.), purchased from P.W. Sutton, 1935 (acq. no. 1935–355)*

A view from landward into the harbour with, at centre left, a small cutter drawn up on the foreground beach in port-bow view and, at far right, rocks closing the beach. At far left into left middle distance, a military tower and the fortified entrance to an inner harbour with the sail of another small vessel visible in it and a Gothic-pattern spired church on the far side. In centre and right distance, with a coastline behind, boats off the bow of the burning *Prudent*, seen from the port quarter, and the *Bienfaisant* partly under sail heading away in far distant starboard-quarter view.

Another version of this was sold as by Marlow at Parker Auctions, Farnham, Surrey, 17 January 2021, lot 42, 380 x 432 mm (15 x 17 in.): it had a prior unidentified auction catalogue cutting on the back as lot ‘513’ with dimensions of 38 x 43 cm (14 7/8 x 16 7/8 in.); also a separate note of the Derby version as attributed to Marlow by ML, with a colour image of that.

**National Libraries and Archives of Canada**

*Richard Paton, ‘The taking of the Bienfaisant and the burning of the Prudent in Louisbourg harbour, 26 July 1758’; purchased as Lot 10 at Sotheby's, London,‘British Paintings 1550–1850’, 8 March 1989, when the dimensions were given as 953 x 1372 mm (37½ x 54 in): NLAC acq. no. 1990–078–1 (other refs now DAP, 00001, Box number: 2000811254: item no. 2882632)*

NLAC considers this likely to be Paton’s painting exh. RA in 1779 (Paton no. 2 above) but without other evidence to support that cited in notes.

Rocks with spectators on them in left foreground watch middle-ground action that shows the *Bienfaisant*, with some tattered sails up and in broad starboard-bow view, being towed out by boats towards right and the *Prudent* well ablaze in broad port-quarter view to left, with British boats leaving it in between. The fortified town stretches across the left background with its main concentration including a Gothic-spired church visible between the ships. Gunfire on land beyond the bow of *Bienfaisant* at right may be that of Amherst’s forces firing on the town.

**Royal Ontario Museum, Canada**

*No artist given but clearly by Paton: curatorial title based on the Canot print, ‘Capture of 'The Prudent' and 'Bienfaisant' in Louisbourg Harbour, 26th July 1758, by boats...Admiral Sir E. Boscawen’; frame size only given as 474 x 691mm (18 5/8 x 27¼ in.). Acq. 956.94 (Sigmund Emanuel Endowment Fund)*

Note in NMM Paton photo file gives canvas dimensions as 16 ½ x 24 ½ in.

A version of Paton no. 1 above. Shows a view with the town fully across the background, and the burning *Prudent* in stern/starboard-quarter view at left just to right of the fortified inner harbour. The church, with just a small pyramidal bell-tower, beyond its bow to right. *Prudent*’s main topmast is falling to starboard and British boats are leaving the burning ship as others tow out the *Bienfaisant*, which has some sails loosed, in starboard bow view to the right.

**Art Gallery of Nova Scotia**

*Richard Paton,* ‘*The action between Admiral Boscawen’s fleet and the French fleet in Louisburgh Harbour, 26th July 1758’; 418 x 679mm (16½ x 26¾ in.). Acq. no. 2015.90. Purchased as Lot 59 in the sale of the Peter Winkworth Collection of Canadiana, Christie’s, London, 1 April 2015 (420 x 680 mm: 16 ½ x 26 ¾in.).* *Made £80,500 against est. of £7K–£10K.*

A version of Paton no. 1 above. AGNS collection notes say that the related 1770/1 Paton print includes a white flag which is not present in this painting. (I cannot see one missing, however, albeit only from a poor catalogue reproduction, so TBC.)

PvdM 3.12.22