The Birth and Quick Death of Canada's First Commercial Brewery, 1671–1675

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The Taproom

The Taproom is a monthly series that explores the rich history of all things beer. It is curated by **Pavla Å imková**.

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Few nations are more blessed by nature than Canada when it comes to brewing beer. The vast northern territory has ideal climatic conditions to produce all of the natural ingredients—barley, hops, and fresh water—to manufacture a perfect pint. Yet Canada's first commercial brewery was a colossal failure, closing just four years after it first opened in 1671.

The driving force behind the brewery was Jean Talon, the energetic and omnipotent Intendant (i.e., governor) of New France. Talon's intendancy saw a whirlwind of activity in New France, as the king's money seeded his pet projects. Talon usually had a direct interest in the crown's enterprises, functioning as a combined Intendant-entrepreneur.

Having grown up near Artois, a region well known for its beer production, and having served as an administrator in French Flanders and Hainault, where beer drinking was more widespread than elsewhere in France, Talon was predisposed to the idea of large-scale beer production. But it was conditions on the ground that caused him to order the construction of a huge brewery at *Ville de Québec*.

Economically, Talon maintained, a brewery would diversify the struggling economy, improve the colony's balance of trade and, as he put it, "stimulate the habitants to work on farming the earth because they will be assured that the excess grain will be used for making this weaker drink." Morally, a brewery would wean the population off of the "demon drink," brandy, which in the words of Talon was turning the "savages" and *canadiens* into "destitute drunks."

Construction began on the state-of-the-art brewery in 1667. Plans called for a large limestone and long-timber building, measuring approximately 147 by 46 feet. Including the attic, the floor beneath the attic, the ground floor, and the half-cellar, the brewery was to have four levels, with an above ground height of 50 feet. The brewery would all of the most modern brewing equipment including a germinator and a kiln for malting, as well as its own mill driven by four horses. Talon would spare no expense.

The construction took four years to complete and when it was done Talon wrote to the King of France, Louis XIV, proudly declaring: “It can produce 2,000 barrels of beer for the West Indies, if they can absorb as much as that, and two other thousands for the domestic market.” Fully state-owned and controlled, it dwarfed other commercial breweries in North America. It could produce 4,000 barrels of beer per year. This level of production was impressive by New World standards (albeit not by European norms). At the English Colony in Massachusetts Bay, where there was a strong beer-drinking and beer-producing culture that dated as far back as the 1630s, brewing was still a cottage industry in 1670. Some 50 years after the construction of Talon’s brewery, the “typical” brewery in the English colonies was still only about half the size of the *Brasserie du Roy* —as Canada’s first commercial brewery was called. When John Molson began brewing in his 36 by 60 foot brewery in Montreal in 1786, he manufactured only 120 barrels of beer that year. The *Brasserie du Roy* could produce thirty-three times that amount, at a time when the population of New France was one-twentieth of what it was in 1786.

In an attempt to ensure the success of the state’s new brewery, Talon promulgated a decree. It restricted the amount of wine and distilled spirits that could be imported into the colony to 800 barrels and 400 barrels, respectively, per year. “I believe,” Talon soberly stated, “it will be good that no one be allowed to import wine or brandy to Canada except under specific conditions, and not to sell it in cabarets to vagabonds.”

Admittedly Talon had hoped to export half the beer manufactured in New France. But trade with the West Indies proved difficult. In the 1670s, shipped beer leaked, went stale, occupied tremendous space, and cost a great deal to transport. As a result, the export trade in Canadian beer did not develop as Talon had hoped and, as a result, there was double the amount of beer for domestic consumption. Talon would pay a heavy price for attempting to meddle in a market that he could not control.

Without an export market for his beer, Talon turned to the domestic market. But there was little appetite among the local population for beer. Despite limiting the amount

of brandy and wine that could be imported into the colony, the inhabitants of New France never gained a taste for the *Brasserie du Roy's* ale. Unlike Talon, most of the immigrants to New France came from France's west coast, the Southwest, and the Paris region; that is from the region just below the line dividing Europeans into beer and wine drinkers. Instead of beer, wine and brandy held a dominant place in the hearts, minds, and stomachs of *canadiens*. To make matters even worse for Talon, the native population much preferred brandy to beer. And in the aristocratic circles of New France in the seventeenth century, beer was considered the drink of the poor—a concept that continued until the Conquest of New France in 1759, which resulted in the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and the removal of the French Crown from the affairs of British North America. Only when the price of wine was so high that it placed the product out of reach did the inhabitants of New France turn to beer.

Jean Talon had made a monumental mistake when he induced the premature birth of the Canadian brewing industry. In his haste to wean the population off of the "demon brandy," he had not thought through the economic consequences of his actions. As a result, the *Brasserie du Roy* paid the ultimate price. In 1675, the operation was shut down and the brewery converted into a palace. The majestic structure stood as a daily reminder to all that there was little appetite for beer in Quebec prior to the Conquest.

Unlike in the other great beer producing nations of the Western world, commercial brewing in Canada started on a grand monopolistic scale. Jean Talon's insistence on a monopoly cut the "industry" off from grass roots economic development. He ignored market dictates believing—erroneously as it turned out—that if he built a brewery, then a market for beer would emerge. But Talon's rigid adherence to the monopolistic dictates of mercantilism produced a stillborn child, one insensitive to local tastes and lacking any intuition of the workings of a diversified, *sui generis* economy.