The study of imperial issues in the general sweep of Hanoverian history has suffered some woeful neglect over the last generation. The impact of an expanding empire on the mother country has been marginalized, more often than not, into single chapters in texts dealing with the eighteenth century. To make matters worse, these chapters are usually dominated by a brief survey of why Britain lost the American colonies. This tunnel vision is not, however, a fair representation of how the British viewed their imperial adventures at the time. Contemporary observers and commentators fully recognized the critical domestic ramifications of an expansionist policy that resulted in the governance of alien peoples and their cultures. But somehow twentieth-century scholars have lost sight of this fact, and an imbalance in the approach to Hanoverian history has resulted. By examining the challenge posed by the conquest of Quebec to the British, it is hoped that some redress to this trend of trivializing imperial issues may be offered.

The conquest of Quebec set in train a sequence of events in which historical opinion is still polarized. American historians argue over whether it can be seen as a primary cause of the War of Independence, French-Canadian scholars dispute the idea of a decapitation in New French society after 1760, and the British imperial school argues about statesmanship and first and second empires. What is missing from this schema is an explanation of the contemporary British context for the Quebec legislation of 1774. This episode in eighteenth-century history is significant not only to historians of empire but also to those concerned with domestic developments in an era of change and instability. Failure to acknowledge these themes has clouded a fuller understanding of the period in general and the political and social background to the act of 1774 in particular. The genesis of the Quebec legislation produced a lively popular and parliamentary debate that went right to the core of political and philosophical assumptions derived from the Glorious Revolution some eighty-five years before. Religious toleration, the function of
representative government, and the meanings of English law all come to the fore in the debate about Quebec. The accent in studying such dynamics in eighteenth-century history has always been on the colonial society concerned, which, in this case, has worked to the detriment of a real appreciation of a unique problem. It seems right therefore to turn the penny over and ask what effect the conquest of Quebec had on Britain. Thus, I have attempted here to treat the debate over Quebec on its own merits, as contemporaries did. The sources used include official documentation and contemporary correspondence, as well as press and pamphlet literature that reflected and amplified the political decisions being taken in London. I have resisted the temptation to weave all the arguments of the period about Canada's future into parallel discussion on Ireland and America. Where the debate overlaps, its importance is acknowledged; but my overriding intention in what follows has been to portray the eighteenth-century debate about Quebec as it was then presented.

A study of this nature always depends a great deal on the pioneering scholarship of others in the field, and to those historians who opened up this subject area I owe a debt. No less important was the financial support for the research that preceded the writing of this study, and this was generously given by the Central Research Fund at the University of Alberta. The book itself has been published with the help of a grant from the Social Science Federation of Canada, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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