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Gobineau's Portrait of Sydney, 1859 Translated by Robert Pichette from Gobineau's Voyage it Terre-Neuve INTRODUCTION: To the right is M. Arthur de Gobineau (1816- 1882). He was no ordinary tourist. He passed through Cape Breton while a member (appointed by Napoleon III) of the Franco-British Joint Commission to determine respective fishing zones on Newfoundland's French Shore. A disciple of the 18th-century Encyclopedists, he apparently loathed colonialism and the bourgeoisie. He had served as Executive Assistant to then Minister of Foreign Affairs for France, Alexis de Tocqueville, the author of Democracy in America. Gobineau's was an interested, passionate eye • and his record gives a rare portrait of Old Sydney Town. M. Gobineau in Sydney: Having finished the few chores we had to do, the Gassendi weighed anchor and sailed (from St. Pierre) for Sydney.... Under such a magnificent sky, such a beautiful sea, without any regrets, we were, for the moment, perfectly happy and even more so because Sydney is considered to be the paradise of this part of the world. We hear so many marvellous accounts of it that one can be truly happy only when steam propels you towards it. Thanks to the dazzling sun which covered us with its light and a little bit of its warmth, the day was passed on deck and with a feeling of well-being to which we were no longer accustomed. At the first light of day~at that moment when there is more darkness than light but when this darkness begins to whiten~we spotted the coast of Cape Breton, which ran to the left of us on a parallel course. It is an immense sea-shore which rises like an amphitheatre by prolonged undulations up to moderate heights. On the horizon you see long, harmonious lines uniting mountains to hills which stand out nobly against the sky. It is a succession of forests with a great variety of trees although conifers predominate; there are marvellously green plains in the middle of which you can see, occasionally, the roofs of a farm. From afar, with the help of a telescope, one can even spot cattle and the ear is under the illusion it hears small bells. But...it would be best not to say so when you are about to give praise.... But all of this country is still very much of a desert. Farms are rare, and as far as villages are concerned, I am not certain that I have seen any. Forests are as God created them and they grow freely without hindrance. Sometimes the fields are fenced-in but 34 THE PAINTING is of a French vessel and landing party in Sydney Harbour. The prominent house • also flying the tricolour • is that of John Bourinot, the Consular Agent (often incorrectly referred to as the French Consul). The painting is by J. Rallier, courtesy of the Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton.