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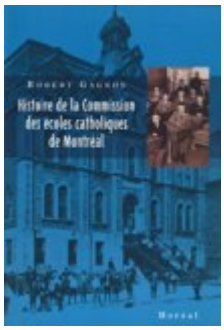
Robert Gagnon. *Histoire de la commission des ecoles catholiques de Montreal.* Montreal: Boreal, 1996. vii + 400 pp. $22.95, paper, ISBN 978-2-89052-751-5.



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Histoire de la commission des ecoles catholiques de Montreal (CECM) examines Roman Catholic public education in the city of Montreal from the inception of the French Catholic School Board in 1846 until the end of 1995. The Catholic Board, according to the author Robert Gagnon, became the largest and one of the most important school boards in the province. For instance, by 1921, in a city of 619,000 persons, the CECM managed a budget of more than three million dollars, and was responsible for 160 schools and nearly 75,000 students (p. 102). The author deftly handles the many elements that dogged the Board, and presents his work in a concise, organized, and compelling writing style that belies the depth of the research. Anyone reading the work would not fail to take from it a broader understanding of Montreal's past, and the factors influencing contemporary Quebec society. The author, probing the complexity of politics, language, race and religion that affected education, and forged the commission argues that, while the church took over education in Quebec at a time when there was no other responsible agency, it also hindered its progress by its narrow and repressive control over such issues as teacher training, curriculum development, and standardization. As a result, the CECM failed to prepare Catholic, especially Francophone, students, to occupy places in the higher levels of corporate Montreal, and thus denied the majority of its citizens access to positions of power and influence. The author believes problems of Francophone assimilation, and Quebec's current struggles to protect its language and culture can be understood in the context of the history of this organization, and the impact of religion, language, and heritage on the growth and development of the CECM is a microcosm of the way they shaped the province, and the nation.

Sociologist John Ralston Saul in his book *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the end of the Twentieth Century* noted that the triumph of the Ultramontane movement in Quebec took French Canada from what might have been a normal political and social evolution to nearly a century of social, economic and political stagnation. [1] Whether or not Saul is exaggerating, the impact of church domination over Quebec may be assessed in part, by seeing its effect on the

Catholic school system, both English and French, in this one particular district. The seven chapters in this work correspond to various periods in the history of Quebec education, and the establishment and growth of ***La Commission des ecoles catholiques de Montreal***, the CECM, the Montreal Catholic School Board. The work begins with the implementation of a public education system, controlled by the Roman Catholic Church, in the years following the 1837 Rebellion. Industrialization; the permanent repercussions of urbanization; opening higher education to the poorer classes; regulating the private Catholic and lay schools; standardizing the curriculum for the elementary and high schools; and the economic crisis of the nineteen thirties are taken up in the middle chapters. Chapters five and six deal with massive population growth, and the consequent increase in school construction, improving teacher training, licensing standards and efforts by teachers to form professional organizations, all issues that faced the Board following World War II. Loss of clerical influence and power in the turbulent sixties are covered in Chapter six, and the book ends with the reform of the Board and the establishment of a fully elected slate of officers.

Gagnon does an excellent work of presenting the historic context. There were over sixty-six schools in the city of Montreal in 1835, the results of a series of school laws passed by the House of Assembly beginning in 1829, and in the custom of the time, renewed each year. Forty of these were founded by lay teachers, some by religious groups, a few were funded and directed by Societies of Education made up of upper class philanthropists. The state controlled the others. Forty-five of the schools were English, thirteen were bilingual. Only eight were French. The state had a small presence, teaching just 30 students in ***L'Institution royale*** (pp. 18-19). The school laws were not renewed after 1836.

Montreal suffered the worst consequences of the 1837 and 1838 rebellions and their aftermath. Many left the war-damaged countryside, attracted to the city by the promise of work in one of several new industries. The city was controlled to a large extent by a minority, wealthy and influential Protestant community that dominated the business sector. Anglophones made up 55.7% of the population by 1842 (p. 18). The majority of Francophones, 42.5% of the population, were clustered in the tenements and boarding houses that circled the industrial sector, at the wrong end of the economic scale. The demographics of Montreal underwent a further shift during the mid eighteen forties with the influx of poor, many ill, Irish refugees fleeing the potato famine in their own country. This English speaking largely Catholic group swelled the ranks of the burgeoning lower class, and joined a sizable Anglophone population already in place. The Francophone elites, who spawned most of the leaders in the conflict, were more or less ostracized from positions of influence. The Catholic Church, already an omnipotent force in Quebec society, moved to fill the void left by the intelligentsia, and cemented their power by taking control of social programs, education and health care.

The Ultramontane Bishop Bourget supported the concept of public education, particularly for Catholic children, but one tightly controlled by the church. Bourget expanded religious communities already in place, invited religious orders, particularly teaching orders from Europe, to establish themselves in Quebec, and encouraged new Quebec based foundations to open. His vision was to have all Catholic children educated by clergy. The curriculum, according to the Bishop, should be limited to no more than was necessary for children to be able to practice the precepts of the Catholic faith, support the church, and remain content with their position in life. The Bishop, and many officials of the day, believed educating people beyond their station would encourage greater hopes and expectations, and engender social unrest (p. 24).

Education remained in private hands until 1846 when a school law was passed in Lower Canada calling for the election of school boards in every municipality except in the cities of Montreal and Quebec, where trustees would be appointed. A system of public funding through taxation would assure some level of stability. The goal was to furnish all citizens with enough of an education to manage in the new industrial world. ***La Commission des ecoles catholiques de Montreal***, The Catholic School Board (CECM) was formed in 1846. Under the law, if the city did not appoint the trustees, the superintendent would undertake the task. The first superintendent of the new Board, Dr. Jean-Baptiste Meilleur, used the opportunity to garner support from the powerful Bishop by allowing him to nominate 6 clergymen, 3 to sit on the commission, and 3 to serve on the Board of Examiners. The other appointees were laymen. One board member was from the Anglophone community. Canon Truteau was nominated president, and the custom of having clergymen preside over the CECM continued until 1919 (p. 28). Laws passed in 1865 and 1875 abolished the Department of Public Education and created two separate school systems based uniquely on Catholic and Protestant religious lines.

Gagnon does not delve in detail on the separate Protestant School Board, but he provides enough comparisons to garner an interesting perspective on Catholic education, and the differences in philosophy in the two publicly funded education streams. The protestant population depended entirely on the Protestant Board to provide an education accessible to all levels of their society. The Protestant Board, with a higher budget from the outset, and a wealthier population base, were responsive to pressure from middle class and upper middle class parents to give their children the highest possible standard of education. Thus they developed an effective academic program, accessible to both boys and girls, while also providing well equipped trades and commercial classes. This, combined with strong second language instruction, assured their graduates would be able to go onto university and continue occupying the higher positions in Montreal's work force. Most middle class or upper middle class Catholic children were sent to any of a stream of private Catholic schools run by priests or nuns. Here they received an excellent education by the standards of the time, albeit heavily indoctrinated with Catholic theology. That left the majority of families who sent their children to the schools under the jurisdiction of CECM, clustered in the ranks of the lower middle or poorer classes. If they could afford to send their children to school at all, they were content if the child received enough of an education to get into the work force as quickly as possible. Catholic clergy saw little reason to educate girls and women beyond what was needed for them to be good Catholic wives and mothers. Statistics for 1881 indicate a systemic disparity between male and female services within the CECM; for example, the CECM paid an average of $16.78 per boy in their own ***L'Academie du Plateau***, $12.39 per boy enrolled in one of the five schools for boys owned and run by male lay teachers, only $2.19 per student in schools administered by lay women, and a mere $1.63 per student in those schools operated by nuns (p. 76).

The unequal distribution of funds between the two Boards put the CECM at a continual disadvantage. Individual property owners could allocate where their taxes would be spent according to whether they registered as Catholic or Protestant, while taxes levied on corporations and property owners designated neutral were distributed proportionally between the two districts (p. 42). Protestants owned most of the property, and their holdings tended to have the higher assessments, making their district wealthier than the CECM even with the combined tax revenues of the English and French Catholic land owners. This made it impossible for the CECM to provide an education equal to the one received in the Protestant school system. The Board was forced to subsidize schools operated by poorly paid, often poorly edu-

cated lay teachers. The financial gap between the Catholic and Protestant Boards continued to widen. The taxation rate in 1924 for Protestants was $1 per $100 property evaluation, while for Catholics it was $0.75. Thus protestants were in a better position financially than the CECM to tackle an exploding school population that marked the early decades of the twentieth century. The CECM had an added responsibility when it took control of 23 smaller school districts, on the fringes of the city, in 1917. Meeting the educational needs of this divergent and widespread student body stretched the limited financial resources to the maximum. There were no schools in some districts operated by the CECM; in others, make-shift classes were found in grocery stores, factories or other businesses. The provincial government increased the taxes levied on neutral business and neutral private property owners from $1.00 to $1.27 per $100 assessment, but there were still 1797 Montreal Catholic school children with no access to schools in 1925 (p. 134).

The turn of the century sparked a spirit of reform and a rise of the intelligentsia in Quebec. One of these reform movements was directed towards education. *La Ligue de l'enseignement*, known in English Canada as the New Education Movement, made-up of city and district aldermen, professionals, and journalists, advocated for a good and uniform standard of education, particularly at the elementary level, accessible to all children, boys and girls, regardless of economic class. Influenced by new ideas coming from the states as well as Western Europe, the reformists agitated for well educated teachers, proper text books, and teaching aids. They deplored the conditions in Montreal's Catholic schools and classrooms, notably those run by lay teachers, and called for more public monies to fix the problems. Reformers and clergy were nearly equally represented on the CECM, but relations between them were not harmonious. The clergy opposed the concept of mandatory education, and the consolidation of small school districts saying it infringed on the autonomy of these parishes to fix the type of education they wished to have. It also threatened individual clerical authority over the local school. Almost all issues which divided the Board went in favour of the church since the clergy always voted as a block, while reformers often differed (p. 94). Nonetheless, attitudes were changing. The CECM built five elementary schools for girls. Domestic Science was added to sewing as a laudable trade for women, since, it was reasoned, these subjects would only enhance their roles as mothers and homemakers (p. 118). While the CECM opened trade schools and shops, and introduced commercial courses, there was still no standardized academic high school curriculum.

The author blames the clerical control over curriculum for the failure of the CECM to prepare Francophone young people for university, but, while regrettable, the Board's actions were somewhat understandable in the context of the elitist ideas of the day, not just among clergymen, but in the general population as well. Marta Danylewycz, in her book, ***Taking the Veil: The alternative to Marriage, Motherhood, and Spinsterhood in Quebec 1840-1920***, writes that Ultramontane views fell on receptive ears in French Canada following the Rebellions of 1837-1838, because, in the absence of *Les patriotes*, nationalists accepted the church as the institution to provide the framework for the survival of their language and culture. "The creation of a denominational system of education... the economic weakness of the French Canadian bourgeoisie... and the willingness of French Canadian politicians to 'bargain' with education all encouraged ultramontane views and policies (p. 2)." The CECM acted well within the perimeters of its mandate by opposing structural changes and more liberal attitudes, and its decisions reflected the opinions of the majority of Francophones.

It is unfair to attack the CECM for not providing a better quality of education, since, under trying circumstances, and little money it targeted its

resources to the most deprived segment of Quebec society. The children the church believed were best suited to run the affairs of government or the church or take their places in the corporate world, were enrolled in private schools where the curriculum led directly to university. Thus the Board did not see an immediate necessity, nor were they overly pressured to implement an academic program. Even without this bias, it is hard to say what more the CECM could have done given the funding arrangements. As late as 1964, the Protestant School Board was receiving $464 per student while the CECM took in $348. The Quebec government equalized the funding system only in 1969 (p. 244). The stream of schools under the control of the CECM were located in some of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. The Board, with its limited budget, could hardly afford to implement an academic program before they were able to open enough classrooms, upgrade teacher qualifications, and furnish their school populations with the means of obtaining even a basic education. The Board is to be commended for its efforts to develop a rudimentary health care program in its schools, and for distributing school supplies, as well as milk and clothing to the poorest of their students, beginning in the depression years of the nineteen thirties (p. 143). Most families within the CECM jurisdiction wanted the schools to prepare their children for the work force quickly so their earnings could contribute towards the family upkeep. A trade or commercial course at the end of grade nine offered that faster route.

Gagnon is on firmer ground when he asserts that the CECM played a role in hastening the assimilation of Francophone children. For the first fifty years of its existence, the author noted, the board managed classes where English and French speaking students learned the two languages without creating any great debates (p. 123). French and English language instruction were given equal importance in these early decades of the CECM's history. Some schools with a number of Anglophone students, offered blended classes where a few subjects were taught in English and others in French. In 1894 this concept was dropped. Students were separated into French and English classes in the thirty-nine schools with sizable English/French populations. Gagnon writes that with the marginalization of Anglophone students, came the decline of second language teaching to Francophone students. Parents were free to choose where to enroll their children and, since English was the dominant language in the economic and business sector, it was the language most parents wanted their children to learn. Nearly all immigrant families and many Francophone families chose to register their children in the English classes. Some English classes had as many Francophone as Anglophone students (p. 51). Anglophone Catholics, making up only 15% of the CECM school population in the west end of Montreal in 1909, but less than 5% elsewhere in the city, lobbied unsuccessfully for a separate school district within the permitters of the CECM as early as 1910. Although they failed to have a separate district, the parents did succeed in having complete autonomy over instruction in English Catholic schools, and English classes within Francophone schools in 1928. This was particularly beneficial for the English students, Gagnon pointed out, since they were then in a position to implement an Academic High school curriculum, thus preparing their students for university. Gagnon said this only increased the tendency of Francophone parents to send their children to the English system. The Francophone students had to wait another 25 years before a solid academic program was available in the French schools (p. 178).

The CECM was responsible for failing to promote French language and culture, when it had the opportunity. Gagnon correctly asserts, it was more concerned with saving souls for the church. Thus it set up programs that would attract Catholic immigrants, from Eastern Europe particularly, into the Catholic system, but without a poli-

cy to integrate them into the French stream. The CECM devised innovative programs to attract immigrant children, introducing Italian, French and English language classes in the evenings and on weekends. The Board also initiated a similar trilingual program from grade one to grade seven, but since the English schools refused to co-operate, these blended classes, fewer than recommended, were located within six of the French schools, beginning in 1949-1950. About 10,000 Italian children followed the studies (p. 229-230). There was also a double-standard at work when it came to second language instruction. English was taught in all schools, even in the unilingual French schools, since the public regarded it to be the language of affluence. Many English children, however, particularly those living in an Anglophone district, were growing up without second language skills as French was not taught in the English schools, or classes. The Anglophone parents were not a large enough group to mount a strong protest, and given the economic structure of the province, speaking French was not an evident advantage. While it was becoming obvious that the CECM needed to do more to protect French language and culture, Board members did not agree on the method, with some wanting English introduced as early as grade two. However nationalists feared that would further erode the French, so second language instruction for Francophone students was delayed until the sixth grade, hastening the exodus of Francophone children to the English classes. Thus, Gagnon asserts, the divide between the 'two solitudes' was solidified, and the stage set for the series of language laws enacted by successive Quebec legislatures since 1970.

The failure of the CECM to protect the Francophone identity illustrates the fallacy of moderate nationalist relying on Ultramontanism to protect their cultural ideals. That the majority of Catholic Quebec was French was more an accident than design, and immaterial to the nature of Ultramontanism. The priority of the official Church was to preserve the church and its structures from reactionary ideas coming from Eastern Block countries after WW II. Canadianizing immigrants, reinforcing Catholic theology, and introducing English Catholic culture were the objectives. In that regard, the CECM was merely a tool, not an agent, and should not be faulted for acting within the perimeters set by the church itself. Slowly but surely the intellectual community in Francophone Quebec grew in strength, questioning and challenging that power structure. The province took the education mandate away from the church in 1973. Only elected officials sit on the Board of the CECM since that time. Still mindful of its duty to protect Catholic religious values, it nevertheless follows the provincial regulations put in place to protect the French language and culture.

This book is marred only by the absence of a bibliography, though the detailed endnotes, and index are helpful. Appendices include a chronological list of important dates and changes to the CECM structure, as well as a list of CECM Presidents since 1846. Pictures, maps and graphs further enrich the text.

NOTES

[1]. John Ralston Saul, ***Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the end of the Twentieth Century*** (Toronto: Penguin Books Canada, 1997), 32.

[2]. Marta Danylewycz, ***Taking the Veil: The Alternative to Marriage Motherhood and Spinsterhood in Quebec, 1840-1920*** (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 31.

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