15. School, Guardian of the Language

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New France, a French and Catholic colony, fell under the domination of a British and Protestant empire. The instructions received by the new governor Murray recommended that the inhabitants be gradually led to embrace the Anglican religion and that, to this end, schools be established. But Murray could do nothing along these lines because there were only a few hundred British subjects out of a population of 70,000 inhabitants and London had asked him to be tolerant and cautious in regard to religion.

School Legislation and the Role of the Clergy

Quite early on, the British appealed to London for assistance in educating their children, and Canadians did likewise. In 1787, Lord Dorchester set up a special committee to examine the problem of teaching and asked the bishop and his coadjutor for their opinions.

The committee proposed a centralized system with one school per parish, one higher-education institution per county and a general university in Québec City, with no theological teaching so as not to offend the beliefs of either the Catholics or Protestants. Mgr Bailly de Messein, the coadjutor, was greatly in favour. Mgr Hubert, the bishop, could not accept that public education was to be taken out of his jurisdiction and placed under Anglo-Protestant
authority. He merely asked a few questions on the planned university and explained that it was perhaps not yet the time to establish schools. The project fell through.

As the parliamentary regime had been established in 1791, the government no doubt now believed that it would be easier to prepare a proper law, passed this time by the deputies, the majority of whom were Canadian. This is what happened in 1801 with the so-called law for the Royal Institution for the Advancement of Learning. It was a law aimed at increasing the number of free schools and the education of young people, under the governor’s authority, in short, a network of State-ruled schools for everyone. However, the schools run by religious communities and private schools already in existence in 1801, or which might be established thereafter, were excluded from this law. Moreover, the founding of Royal Schools had to be freely decided by the inhabitants of each parish. Once again, the fear of Protestantization, whether justified or not, and above all, of the State’s authority, dominated the clergy’s thinking. Mgr Plessis advised his priests not to take advantage of this law. Nevertheless, from 1805 to 1824, a few parishes did (13 out of 84) and were all the better for it.

In 1824, the clergy had a law passed in the Assembly known as the Fabriques Act, which authorized vestries (or fabriques), responsible for the administration the parishes, to contribute up to one quarter of their annual salary to the financing of schools. In 1829, the House finally passed a law known as the Syndics Act which gave parliament supreme authority in regard to education with, however, an active participation from commissioners (or syndics) elected by the landowners as the latter contributed to the financing of the schools. Though the first law had had
few results, the second was accepted by the population to such an extent that the number of schools rose from 327 to 1,372. Unfortunately, the political crisis put an end to the educational system in 1836.

The clergy, who still wanted a return to the former system where schools were governed by the Church, did not give in. Mgr Lartigue and several priests reminded Mgr Signay, the bishop of Québec City, that education must be seized by right. The Montréal bishopric’s newspaper, *Mélanges religieux*, lamented the fact that the 1841 bill excluded bishops and the Catholic clergy from running schools for which, “by divine right,” they were responsible. In actual fact, at the request of the Dissenters (non-Anglican Protestants), the School Acts of 1841-1846 allowed Catholics and Protestants to control schools following their religious dictates. In practice, this gave denominationality to elementary schools, the only ones included in the legislation, without it having been promulgated as such.

**Setting up Schools**

In the absence of a centralized network, what happened with schools should be examined. A distinction should be made between cities and rural areas. The latter had very few schools apart from in the Montréal region where there were more nuns and in the rare parishes where the Royal Institution had been established. In 1790, Canadians had some forty schools for 160,000 inhabitants (that is to say, one school per 4,000 inhabitants) while Anglophones had 17 for 10,000 inhabitants (that is to say, one for less than 600 inhabitants, most of which were in the city). In 1830, in the cities and rural areas combined, there were 81 Royal Schools, 752 syndics
schools and 154 private schools for a total of 987. In 1850, there were already 2,005 public schools.

Rural areas again benefited from the founding of so-called classical colleges, almost all of which were founded in rural presbyteries (11 out of 15 opened before 1850) and which had preparatory classes at the elementary level.

The situation could not be permitted to remain so wretched for so long in the cities of Québec and Montréal. In Québec City, the bishop and priest established five schools prior to 1850, the Ursuline nuns and the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame had their convents, while the Petit Séminaire took over from the Jesuits. But this was not sufficient for a population that rose from 9,000 to 42,000 inhabitants in 1851. As had been the case in England and France since the eighteenth century, private individuals gradually began opening schools for girls and boys in their homes. These private schools provided elementary education, classical studies, accomplishments (music, singing, dance, needlework) and training for work. English- and French-speaking teachers taught in them.

However, in the cities, there were still a lot of poor children, who were totally illiterate. After 1851, following the 25 years of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the citizens of Québec City established three educational societies as was the custom in England. Living off collections at the doors of churches, a few government grants and money from various associations, these taught many children of both languages how to read and write.
Trois-Rivières had its Educational Society and Montréal had four, just for Anglophones. The Island of Montréal, both the city and rural areas, was even more favoured thanks to the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame and the Sisters of Charity (Grey Nuns) and also thanks to Sulpicians and Mgr Lartigue who financed the schools run by nuns and the laity. In 1825, the Island had 54 schools (41 in the city and suburbs) and 89 in 1835 (66 in the city and suburbs), a 65-per-cent increase in ten years. The Syndics Act was largely responsible for this important increase.

**French Teaching**

The worst anachronism that could be committed here would be to judge the teaching of the language using modern criteria. The notion of diplomas and programmes did not exist prior to the middle of the nineteenth century and it is impossible to evaluate school attendance. Teachers taught reading, writing and arithmetic. As yet, we know of no contemporary comments on the quality of the language taught. We therefore have little possibility of making any precise evaluation. Yet, what cannot be measured can be estimated.

The teachers used some school textbooks such as spelling books and syllabaries. Furthermore, from 1778 to 1848, 77 textbooks, most of which had been issued in France, were published in Québec City or Montréal or written by Canadian teachers. Notably, there were grammar books by Frenchmen Restaut, Charles-François Lhomond, E.-A. Lequien and Jean Palairret, and by Canadians J.-Ph. Boucher-Belleville, Joseph-François Perrault and Amable Berthelot. In 1822, in his *Cours d’éducation élémentaire*, Perrault had outlined a programme for
the six classes of the Québec educational society, in which four of the six subjects were devoted to learning the language. In 1850, F.-X. Valade published the *Guide de l’instituteur*. Dealing with 11 subjects, he ascribed 75 pages out of 318 to language. As for classical colleges, they taught a quality language.

In all schools, teachers taught French to Francophones and the majority of them were laymen. It could not have been otherwise because there had not been any new teaching religious orders for over a hundred years; they were not very numerous and were mostly established in the Montréal region. The situation changed after 1840 with the arrival of French orders and the founding of Canadian ones. Thus, nuns and priests gradually came to make up the majority of teachers. With some exceptions, the clergy – that is to say priests and religious clerics – generally did not teach at the elementary level even though the clergy controlled teaching from this decade onwards.

The fact remains, however, that the clergy, through its avowed fear of Protestantization and its determination to prevent the government from taking over responsibility for public education, delayed the implantation of a true school network for a good fifty years and only accepted it at a time when the door was wide open for it to take control once again.