

Linguistic and Ethnic Factors in the French Irish Catholic Relations in Ontario

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Until the 1850's, Francophones constituted a majority of the Canadian population; since Confederation the reverse has been true, and increasingly so. The continued growth of the French Canadian population was due almost exclusively to a phenomenally high birthrate to which immigration has added hardly at all. It was in this context, then, that the scarcity of arable land in Québec's Saint Lawrence river valley coupled with the density of the area's population and periodic economic crises, prompted Francophones, in the last three quarters of the nineteenth century, to migrate in ever-increasing numbers to the adjacent province of Ontario. Needless to say, their Church accompanied them. During this same period, Irish immigrants also began coming to Canada, as a result of the critical conditions prevalent in Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century. Although Ontario had previous settlements of Francophones in its southwestern tip, the phenomenon of large-scale Catholic immigration, both French and English, became a subject of concern and a springboard for nativist feelings among Ontario's Protestant Anglophone population.

At the outset, during the eighties and nineties, the main conflict was religious; the Protestants, led by the Orangemen, and the Protestant Protective Association (1891-1897), feared a Catholic takeover of their country, and the Catholics, in spite of their ethnic differences, stuck together in order to ward off the attacks of the Protestants. Within this context, schools became the foci of debate, the Catholics wanting full equality in tax-sharing for their public (but separate) schools. Indeed, Ontario had a system of public (or common) schools, all subject to the Ontario Department of Education, but wherein local school boards could declare their schools denominational, and thereby become "Separate" schools. The Protestants as a rule wanted one faith, one flag and one language.

The issue which was allegedly a religious conflict at its inception, slowly transformed itself in the three decades between 1883 and 1913 into an explicitly ethnic, linguistic and cultural conflict, and the Roman Catholics who had resisted the Orangemen's sallies in unison during the eighties and nineties, became progressively more divided along linguistic and cultural lines. By 1910 the latter issue took precedence over the Protestant-Catholic

quarrel. Bishops, clergy and faithful began to line up according to their ethnic affiliation and to see their principal opponents as either Irish or French-Canadian Catholics, and by the same token the Protestant “enemy” receded into the background. The engagement within the hierarchy developed during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and continued through the first quarter of the twentieth; knowledge of the skirmishing was usually hidden from public view. In a rather intriguing “about-face,” in the second decade of the twentieth century, the Irish Catholics of Ontario were defending the same cause as their traditional enemies the Orange Lodges, against the French Catholics, their erstwhile allies. Indeed, I would maintain that whenever ethnic factors appeared at odds with other norms of decision (such as the pronouncements of the hierarchy, the civil governments, or the courts), the former, during the first quarter of the twentieth century, overshadowed the latter among both Francophone and Anglophone Canadians.

Both camps made use of every weapon available, including their church and diplomatic pressures by foreign governments. The French and English Canadian Roman Catholic hierarchy each appointed an agent in Rome to defend their respective causes. There was much misunderstanding of each party by the other, much unquestionable sincerity. In the outcome, the French group in Ontario, supported by the Francophone Catholics of Québec, succeeded in breaking an Ontario law unfavorable to themselves, and succeeded in reversing the policies of Rome with regard to the language and cultural affiliation of episcopal nominees to Ontario sees.

The fourth Provincial Council of Québec in 1868 had divided Canada into three *ecclesiastical* provinces, namely Québec, Toronto, and Saint-Boniface, the norm of division being that Québec was for the French, Toronto for the English, and Saint-Boniface for the “métis” or half-breeds (mixture of Indian and French Canadian Voyageurs), the latter being centered in the prairies of Western Canada. The diocese of Ottawa, Ontario, straddled the boundary between the two civil provinces of Québec and Ontario, but since the majority of its Roman Catholic faithful was Francophone, the Bishop was Francophone and was a suffragan of the Québec Archbishop and belonged to the ecclesiastical province of Québec. The Archbishop of Toronto informed Ottawa’s Bishop Guignes as early as 1868 that he would ask Rome to make Ottawa part of the Toronto ecclesiastical province. Guignes resisted until his death in 1874, whereupon the English bishops of Ontario submitted a petition to Rome arguing the same case. J. T. Duhamel, Guignes’ successor in Ottawa in 1874, also objected to the Toronto move, claiming it was merely an attempt by the English of Ontario to remove the French-speaking Bishop of Ottawa and replace him by an English-speaking one. Rome temporized, and the Toronto group reiterated its plea in 1879 and again in 1881. The latter attempt was prompted by a petition by the Archbishop of

Québec in 1881 requesting that Rome promote Ottawa to the level of Archdiocese, and make it the head of a new ecclesiastical province, continuing to straddle the Ontario-Québec boundary. This was done in 1886. However, Toronto continued to pressure Rome, demanding that the Ottawa Archdiocese be split to conform with the civil boundaries and that Ottawa become a part of the ecclesiastical province of Toronto. Increased pressures in this regard forced Archbishop Duhamel to write a lengthy rebuttal in 1897.

Ecclesiastical French-English quarrels were to come to a head after 1910, for on April 25 of that year, the Reverend M. F. Fallon, O.M.I., was consecrated Bishop of London, Ontario, a bi-ethnic diocese, and in August, Archbishop C. H. Gauthier of Kingston was transferred to the see of Ottawa, vacant since Duhamel's death in 1909. Fallon's position was already clear through his involvement in the University of Ottawa affair. Appointed Vice-Rector in 1896 he at once emerged as the leader of Ottawa's Irish-Catholic community. Gauthier's sympathies were also Anglophone: he had called and chaired an August 15, 1910 meeting of Ontario's Anglophone Bishops which petitioned the Ontario Premier to disregard the requests of the January, 1910, Congress of Franco-Ontarians. Yet Rome appointed Gauthier to direct the destinies of an Archdiocese and ecclesiastical province whose faithful were four-fifths French. Zealots of both parties compiled statistics to show the numbers of English or French faithful in parishes, dioceses, schools, and mission posts. In mixed parishes the comparative length of French and English sermons, catechism classes, and singing was tabulated. Any and all episcopal vacancies were the occasion for lengthy and varied petitions by an increasing number of interested parties including Bishops, clergy, and politicians, requesting a successor of their persuasion or at least the transfer of their "bigot" elsewhere in order to make room for their man.

The clash between French and English Catholics over *education* was more extensive and complex than this, however. It surfaced during the first decade of the twentieth century at the University of Ottawa. Incorporated in 1848 as Saint Joseph's College in Bytown (later Ottawa), and chartered in 1866 at the last session of the Parliament of the United Canadas, the University of Ottawa was from the outset a bilingual school established by its founder Bruno Guigues, O.M.I., a Frenchman, to serve the needs of the Ottawa area. Guigues became the first Bishop of Ottawa as well as Provincial Superior of the Oblates in Canada. Upon his death in 1874, the school became unilingual English and remained so until 1901 when it reverted back to its bilingual policy. Fallon, also O.M.I. and newly-ordained (1894), had been first appointed to the University in 1894 as a Professor of English. His period as Vice-Rector was brief; it ended in 1898; but he was then appointed Pastor of the campus' St. Joseph Church. It was in this capacity that Fallon led the resistance to the University's reversion to bilingualism in 1900-1901.

In the summer of 1901, however, he was transferred to the Oblate “Holy Angels” parish in Buffalo, N.Y. He later claimed his removal from Ottawa resulted from a plot. Stationed outside the country, Fallon remained the central figure in the University of Ottawa disputes from 1901 to 1908. At one stage or another the partisans managed to enlist Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the Apostolic Delegates, Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore, and, necessarily, the international administration of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. When the smoke cleared, the University was using French, but Fallon was Bishop of London and Gauthier of Ottawa.

Since 1883, meanwhile, the Orange Lodges became very active in shaping Ontario opinion and in pressuring the Ontario government, primarily through the parliamentary opposition Conservative party. The result was a series of government-sponsored inquiries into the status and quality of Ontario’s bilingual schools (the schools of the Francophone minority), and some provincial regulations requiring that the teaching in these schools be done in the English language (1885, 1891). But legal loopholes in these rulings allowed the bilingual schools to continue operations as before, and Ontario’s Liberal government tolerated the situation.

The Ottawa Separate School Board, elected by Separate School ratepayers, operated both the English and bilingual schools of its jurisdiction. It was decided at a public meeting of 1886, chaired by Archbishop Duhamel, that the Board would thereafter divide itself into a French and an English Committee, each being responsible for the handling of funds and the enactment of educational regulations applicable to bilingual and English Separate Schools respectively. Fallon, then a student at the University of Ottawa, attended this meeting. Each city ward would be entitled to have one English and one French trustee, and English voters would not interfere in the election of the French trustee and vice-versa. This arrangement appears to have worked to the satisfaction of both parties until 1903, when because of the controversy around the University of Ottawa, Francophone rate payers intervened in one city ward’s Separate School Board election, helping to defeat the English candidate who was unsympathetic to bilingualism and electing an Anglophone candidate who was sympathetic to the claims of the Francophones. The French thereby gained an effective majority on the Separate School Board and in 1906 the system of dual Committees was abolished. All schools, both bilingual and English, reverted to the direct control of the full Board of Trustees. By this time, Francophones constituted a sizeable majority (2/3) of the Catholics subject to the Ottawa Separate School Board but were nevertheless electing only nine of the Board’s eighteen Trustees. In this context, the Anglophone Catholic faction claimed that it was contributing more tax dollars than the Francophone Catholic and that the School Board was spending more on the bilingual Schools than on the

English Separate Schools.

The turn of the century also witnessed another French-English educational issue in Ottawa. "Les Frères des Ecoles Chrétiennes" had established themselves in Ottawa in the early 1860's and had grown by the nineties into the largest teaching Order in the city, staffing most of the boys' schools. In 1893-1894, they were accused of a series of misdemeanors in their administration of several Ottawa Separate Schools (e.g. outdated pedagogical theory, mediocre manuals, overpricing of textbooks, arbitrary discipline), and a movement to oust them from Ottawa was initiated by some prominent Ottawa Francophones. Archbishop Duhamel, supported by his clergy, saw their move against the Brothers as a manifestation of anticlericalism and excessive anglophilia. The group succeeded in having the "Frères" removed from the city's schools in 1897, much to the Archbishop's regret, but the Brothers were to return in 1902.

In 1907, after a prolonged judicial dispute, the Privy Council in Great Britain upheld an Ontario Court ruling that "Religious" (Nuns and Brothers) teachers in Ontario, had to obtain provincial certification just as any other teacher. Ontario's Catholic hierarchy had fought this regulation, particularly because of its effect on the bilingual Catholic schools. In fact these schools were largely staffed by "Religious" coming from the province of Québec where no provincial certification laws existed apart from those enacted by particular congregations of "Religious." If these teachers were required to qualify by Ontario standards, many would return to Québec and Ontario's bilingual schools would lose many of their cheap laborers. A Congress representative of all the French of Ontario was held in January 1910, attended by some 1,200 delegates. The Congress, via its Executive, sent a list of requests to the Ontario Government in February, 1910.

Meanwhile, Ontario's Bishops were on the verge of obtaining more advantageous tax-sharing for Ontario's Separate schools. The Government, in late 1909, agreed to submit to the Legislature a revised bill to that effect; the text had been hammered out to the mutual satisfaction of the Bishops and the Government. But after receiving the requests of the *Association Canadienne-Française d'Éducation d'Ontario* (ACFEO), the Premier informed the English Bishops that this so complicated matters that their tax-sharing bill would not be submitted to the Legislature in the foreseeable future. The Bishops were furious, and began calling meetings of Ontario's English-speaking Bishops only, whereas the English and French hierarchies of Ontario were invited to former meetings. It is at this time (April 1910), that Fallon was consecrated Bishop of London, and at a meeting of August 15, 1910, the English-speaking Bishops of Ontario delegated him as their spokesman to the provincial government against any compromise with the Franco-Ontarians.

Less than a month after his consecration of April 25, 1910, Fallon had convened a high official of the Ontario Department of Education in order to express to him, in most categorical terms, his determination to suppress all bilingual schooling in his diocese and to handle clerical agitators defending that cause; he wanted the government to do its share on the political and administrative side. Mr. Hanna reported this conversation to his superior, Doctor Pyne, Minister of Education, in a lengthy letter, which was released to the press four months later by a Francophone sympathizer working for an Ontario Cabinet Minister, and published in *Le Devoir* in October 1910. On June 5, 1910, the *Detroit Free Press*, in an article entitled “*French and Irish War in Ontario*,” made the issue a public one and stated that the Irish Catholics of Ontario were now defending the same cause as the Orangemen, their traditional enemies, against the French Catholics. In July, Bishop Fallon reiterated his stand in a diocesan retreat for priests, and in August, Premier James Pliny Whitney wrote the ACCEO telling them that the law as it then stood allowed the Franco-Ontarians all desirable freedom.

In September of 1910, at a Montreal Eucharistic Congress, Archbishop Bourne of London, England, made a speech arguing that the Catholic Church in Canada had better adopt the English language as its sole mode of expression, for English was the language of the future. This prompted Henri Bourassa, former federal Member of Parliament, and editor in chief of *Le Devoir* in Montréal, to respond by defending the French Canadians’ right to speak French in their country, and to advise churchmen to “be all things to all men” and thus to speak French with Francophone people. His newspaper thereupon published the Hanna-Pyne letter of May 1910, relating the Fallon-Hanna conversation in Sarnia, Ontario. Fallon then reentered the arena by a public speech in Goderich, Ontario, arguing anew his belief that bilingualism was pedagogically unsound, its only result being to make the French Canadians “hewers of wood and drawers of water.”

Meanwhile the Ontario Government had established another Commission of Inquiry led by Dr. Merchant, and bearing again on Ontario’s bilingual schools. The Commission’s Report led to the enactment of Circular of Instructions No. 17 by the Ontario Department of Education in June of 1912, this being made a permanent law in August of 1913. The Circular, commonly referred to as “Regulation XVII,” forbade the use of French as a language of instruction or communication in any school of Ontario, except in cases where in the judgment of the Chief Inspector of Schools, the children could not understand English. In the latter case, French could be used in the first two years of schooling but not thereafter.

Since the regulation only affected French-speaking pupils, and since the latter were almost all Catholic, and therefore the great majority were in Separate schools under the strong control of the provincial Bishops, the

“Regulation XVII” controversy was particularly acute. Bishop Fallon led the Anglophone Catholic camp, the ACFEO prompted by Franco-Catholic Bishops and clergy led the Franco-Ontarian camp, and the Ottawa Separate School Board, advised by the ACFEO, led the open defiance of the Ontario Government’s “Regulation XVII.”

Samuel Genest, Chairman of the Ottawa Board and future President of the ACFEO (1919-1921), informed the Ontario Department of Education in September 1912, that Ottawa would not comply with “seventeen.” Toronto thereupon threatened and cajoled the Ottawa Trustees but to no avail. Meanwhile, Ottawa Anglophone Catholics became progressively more vociferous and menacing, particularly after the Toronto Government withheld all grants from the Ottawa Separate School Board until they complied with the infamous Regulation. Genest was not to give in. Teachers went unpaid, all building programs were discontinued, collections were taken up throughout the Province of Québec, and the Québec Legislature passed special legislation enabling Québec school boards to contribute to the Ottawa cause. Whenever English school Inspectors appeared in bilingual schools, children left their classrooms by windows and fire escapes.

In an attempt to break its bilingualist opposition, the Ontario Legislature passed special legislation in 1915 dissolving the Ottawa Separate School Board and appointing in its place a three-man Commission. The Ottawa Board thereupon appealed to the Courts claiming the Ontario Legislature’s move was *ultra vires*. The King’s Privy Council ultimately upheld the Genest appeal, the Commission was dissolved, the elected School Board reinstated, and the three-member Commission was sued for illegitimately spending the Ottawa Separate School Board’s funds.

Ottawa’s Francophone resistance had its dramatic moments. When the three-man Commission of 1915 took over a local school, ousting its regular teachers and mounting a police guard to prevent the rebels from returning, Ottawa’s Franco-Catholic parents converged on the school and while the men kept the police busy, the regular teachers reentered through the windows. The women then mounted a day and night guard around the school to prevent a recurrence of the incident; they used hat pins as weapons. Lady Laurier, wife of Canada’s former Prime Minister, chaired a drive to collect money to purchase coal for the schools, and Ottawa’s teaching Brothers led the local schoolchildren in demonstrations and protest parades.

The Canadian Catholic hierarchy divided along linguistic and cultural lines, for or against “seventeen.” The Anglophone Catholic hierarchy to a man favored the new ruling; the Franco-Catholic hierarchy just as unanimously rejected it. Rome endeavored to obtain a compromise solution, but to no avail; indeed the Cardinal-Archbishop of Québec and Primate of the Catholic Church in Canada warned Rome that if the French Canadians

observed many more instances of a pro-Anglicization policy by the Church, particularly in the nomination of Bishops, there were strong possibilities that schism would ensue, for the French Catholics were resolved to defend their rights at all costs.

While several appeals in the Courts were being decided (1914-1916) in favor of the Government's stand, Pope Benedict XV, in 1916, sent a letter to the Canadian Bishops urging peace and understanding, defending the right of Francophones to learn and speak their language, and urging the Government's right to require that they learn English. This was the position the French Canadians had defended all along; the English Bishops agreed but insisted that the first two years of elementary schooling were sufficient for the French language: thereafter all should speak English. A meeting of all Ontario Bishops was held in January 1917 in Ottawa, whereupon Fallon published a lengthy (60 pages) memorandum to his episcopal colleagues, defending his stand on Regulation XVII, decrying the abuse he was subjected to by French newspapers, and calling upon the assembled Bishops to do nothing about "seventeen." The assembled Lords did manage, however, to publish a joint pastoral letter to their faithful which rather blandly repeated the Pope's statement, but hardly added anything to it. This letter did, however, show a willingness to stay together, for it was signed by all Ontario Bishops, both French and English. It marks the end of the period of open warfare among the Catholics of Ontario. Bilingual and bicultural peace gradually returned during the next ten years (1918-1927), and Regulation XVII was abrogated in September 1927.

The men responsible for the return to normalcy in French-English relations between 1918 and 1927 were Liberal Senator Napoleon Belcourt and the members of the Unity League of Ontario. Belcourt had been President of the ACFEO from 1910 to 1912 when he resigned, due to infighting within the Association. In 1920 he was asked by Cardinal Bégin of Québec in the name of the Francophone hierarchy to reassume command of the ACFEO, which he agreed to do; he was reelected to the Presidency in 1921. He immediately proceeded, in unison with some leading Toronto intellectuals, to found the Unity League of Ontario, whose avowed purpose was to recreate bilingual and bicultural unity in Ontario. This League was the primary instrument in changing Ontario public opinion during the twenties. It is significant that of the one hundred and fifty members of this Association, only one was Roman Catholic, namely Belcourt himself; every other member was Protestant. Although for political purposes, it was essential that the League be made up of Anglophones, the fact that none of these were Roman Catholic illustrates a key part of my thesis, namely that racism and Francophobia were much more prevalent among Ontario's Irish Catholics than they were among the Anglo-Protestant majority of the population.

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