

Paul Gérin-Lajoie.

**COMBATS D'UN RÉVOLUTIONNAIRE TRANQUILLE:
PROPOS ET CONFIDENCES.**

Montréal: Centre Educatif et Culturel, 1989.

378 pp.

Normally, the appearance of yet another work on Quebec education in the 1960s would not rate a second glance. The period known as the Quiet Revolution has been examined, dissected, and laid bare by historians, political scientists, sociologists, and thesis students. However, what makes Paul Gérin-Lajoie's book different is that he is different. He writes not from the comfortable vantage point of the disinterested spectator, but from the perspective of the participant, for he was one of the principal educational figures of the period. In 1960 he was appointed Youth Minister in the Liberal government of Jean Lesage. When the government established the Ministry of Education in 1964, the first of its kind in almost a century, he became minister.

Although *Combats d'un révolutionnaire tranquille* is not a scholarly book in the conventional sense, it will be of interest to scholars. The work is part memoirs and part social history, with education as the *leitmotiv*. In this highly personal account, Gérin-Lajoie takes us behind the political scenes, giving us an insider's view of developments leading up to and during the reform-happy days of the 1960s. It was during this period that a traditional, elitist, church-dominated education system gave way to a modern, democratic, state-directed one.

Those who like their history tightly written and logically presented will find fault with this book. The work is disjointed, some chapters appearing to belong elsewhere in the text or nowhere at all. These organizational defects are particularly apparent in the first half of the book, which alternates between centuries of Quebec educational history and the author's personal and professional life. No matter; the book is rarely dull. Gérin-Lajoie manages to keep the impatient reader at bay by drawing on personal, anecdotal, and documentary sources of information. The work is further enriched by the abundant use of photographs, illustrations, and tables.

Gérin-Lajoie did not come to government in 1960 as an educational dilettante. A lawyer by profession, he served as legal adviser to the classical colleges in the 1950s, during which he gained an appreciation of the educational woes of the province, despite the Duplessis government's soothing refrain that the Quebec school system was one of the best in the world.

Federal government studies for the period placed Catholic Quebec dead last among the ten provinces as measured by such criteria as school attendance, teacher qualifications, and money spent on education. It was precisely this sad state of affairs which triggered massive reforms in education in the 1960s.

Gérin-Lajoie's name is closely linked to the establishment of the Ministry of Education in 1964, arguably the single most important reform of the Quiet Revolution. The creation of the ministry represented, above all, a changing of the guard, the state displacing the church in the educational domain. Heretofore, the provincial government had been content to sit on the sidelines, willing to defer to the Catholic Church in most aspects of learning.

The author explains that the notion of an education ministry was not a priority of the Liberal government when it took power in 1960. Indeed, the idea was anathema to some members of the government, including apparently Premier Lesage, who in the opening session of Parliament declared: "It is not a question and it will never be a question under my administration of creating a ministry of public education." Despite this strong statement, Gérin-Lajoie claims that the premier was privately favorable to the establishment of an education ministry.

At any rate, the initial push for a ministry came not from the government but from the Parent Commission, a royal commission created in 1961 to report on all aspects of education in the province. In its first volume, which appeared in April, 1963, the commission sent shock waves through the educational establishment by recommending that the government establish a ministry of education. Such an authority, argued the commission, would give education a single, democratic voice at the provincial level by placing learning under the authority of the state.

Two months later the government tabled Bill 60 in the Legislative Assembly, which proposed the creation of a ministry of education along the lines recommended by the Parent Commission. Since the bill would have the effect of ousting the church from the councils of educational power, the government nervously awaited the reaction of the Catholic bishops, who had the most to lose in the legislation. Curiously, the episcopate was slow to react to the proposed law, which Gérin-Lajoie attributes to a split in the ranks of the church. However, a telephone call from Cardinal Léger to Premier Lesage on July 2 forced the government to make a decision. The liberal-minded churchman, who only the day before had returned from Rome – a little matter of electing a successor to Pope John XXIII – asked the premier to postpone action on Bill 60 so that the bishops might have more time to study the measure. Lesage, who looked to slow the legislative treatment of Bill 60,

welcomed the cardinal's intervention. Six days later the Cabinet met and decided overwhelmingly to put the measure on hold. Gérin-Lajoie, one of three ministers who voted against the action, believed at the time that Bill 60 was being permanently shelved.

However, Lesage was able to mollify his dejected youth minister by assuring him that Bill 60 was not legislatively dead, only delayed, to be taken up in the fall session of Parliament. The premier went further, calling upon Gérin-Lajoie to undertake a cross-province tour, with the aim of winning support for an education ministry. The youth minister jumped at the chance of selling Bill 60 to a sceptical public. Accordingly, beginning in August and running to the middle of October, the Gérin-Lajoie "road show" played the cities and towns of the province. With the zeal and singlemindedness of a missionary, the youth minister preached a dual message to his audiences: a ministry of education was necessary to effect the democratization and modernization of Quebec education; such an authority posed no threat to the religious character of Quebec schools.

Largely due to Gérin-Lajoie's successful selling campaign, most of the criticism surrounding Bill 60 had evaporated by the time the new session of the Quebec Parliament opened in the fall of 1963. Even the expected strong opposition from the church had not materialized. Indeed, the Catholic bishops informed the government that the church was prepared to retire from public education. They, however, pressed the government for assurances that the right of individuals and groups to maintain private schools would be protected. The government consented to the bishops' request and a provision to that effect was inserted into the preamble of Bill 60, which became law in 1984. Educational *perestroika* had come to Quebec.

With the Ministry of Education in place and Gérin-Lajoie at the helm, the pace of educational change accelerated in the succeeding years. No level of learning or educational institution, from kindergarten to university, escaped the scrutiny of the reformer. And although the Lesage government suffered an election defeat in 1966, the momentum of reform continued unabated through the decade. We owe a debt of gratitude to Paul Gérin-Lajoie and other "quiet revolutionaries." They succeeded in making education a birthright of all Quebecers.

Roger Magnuson
McGill University