



<http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic> • ISSN 1492-7810  
2014-16 • Vol. 11, No. 1

**David Fraser, “Honorary Protestants”: *The Jewish School Question in Montreal, 1867-1997*.  
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. Pp. 536 pp. CDN \$66.00 (cloth).  
ISBN: 978-1-4426-3048-2.**

**Reviewed by Anthony Di Mascio, Bishop’s University**

Almost entirely, Canada’s school systems are under the control of provincial governments. The one major exception is the education of Indigenous peoples in Canada (and the ways in which the federal government used that power. The horrifying legacy of the education of Indigenous peoples are realities we are only beginning to come to terms with in this country). Canada’s decentralized model of public education is owed to the political compromise of 1867. When the three colonies that created the federal government of Canada came together in 1867, schooling was seen as essential to the cultural makeup of local identities. The colony of Canada itself, comprised of the former Lower and Upper Canadian colonies of the pre-union period, had already operated distinct school systems which met the needs of their distinct communities. One community was predominantly French and Catholic, the other English and Protestant. In 1867, politicians entrenched that divide into section 93 of the *British North America Act*. While it allowed Catholics in Ontario and Protestants in Quebec to establish dissentient schools, it overlooked other religious groups. The compromise to unite a dualistic Canada never took into account the problems it might create for a pluralistic future. Those problems are the focus of David Fraser’s insightful new study, “*Honorary Protestants*”: *The Jewish School Question in Montreal, 1867-1997*.

Fraser’s main focus is on the legal and, to a lesser extent, political dynamics at play in the evolution of the Jewish struggle for public schooling in Quebec. The debates and legal battles over schooling hinged, he asserts, on the strict limits of the constitutional norms set out in the rigid terms of section 93. Yet, as the author also points out in his study on several occasions, the question of the public financing of Jewish education suggests that section 93 was often not so rigid. Jewish school officials found ways of financing their schools, aligning with either Protestant or Catholic school boards to funnel public funds into their schools.

Still, the threat of a strict interpretation and implementation of section 93 always loomed large. When officials of the Baron de Hirsh Institute and the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue (Canada’s oldest synagogue) fell into a seemingly interminable battle over school financing in 1892, for example, the provincial government threatened “to study the legality of any and all arrangements under which the Protestant and Roman Catholic School Commissions might give any public monies at all to schools that were neither Roman Catholic nor Protestant” if an agreement were not forthcoming in the near future (107). For most of Quebec’s history, Fraser highlights, Jewish parents were essentially forced to rely on the benevolence of school boards to integrate Jews into their schools. Far too often, however, when push came to shove, that benevolence came up against the immovable force of section 93 and the constitutional entrenchment of Protestant and Catholic, but not Jewish, education.

Fraser takes the reader through series after series of legal battles, court rulings, and policy debates fought by Jewish Montrealers who sought what they considered to be their fundamental rights as citizens. Time and again Fraser's narrative illustrates Jewish Montrealers taking one step forward only to be pushed two steps back. When, for example, in the early twentieth century Jewish leaders pressed for representation on school boards and as school commissioners, "Protestants fought back, defending the right of Protestant schools to be Protestant, run by Christians, as guaranteed by section 93" (159). Case after case Fraser guides his reader through the intricacies of educational case law and the constitution as it pertained to the education of Jewish Montreal. His narrative is one of legal victories and political defeats, and Jewish compromises for practical, if unsatisfactory, guarantees for their children's right to attend Protestant schools in Montreal.

In the end, Fraser concludes that the history of Jewish education in Montreal, one marked by the unfolding narrative of conflict and compromise, was ultimately victim to the legal reality of section 93 and to the socio-political reality of life as a non-Protestant, non-Catholic (non-English, non-French) cultural group. The Jews of Montreal would get their education, but it would be within a legal and political context that never fully recognized them as complete Quebec citizens. Full participation in public education would not be possible, really, until the constitutional amendment of 1997 which replaced confessional school boards in Quebec with linguistic ones. While not the primary objective of that amendment, it did, nonetheless, answer the Jewish School Question once and for all.

One of the major strengths of this study is how the author brings to light the neglected legal history of Jewish education in Quebec. Fraser offers us a strong legal understanding of the struggle for Jewish educational equality in Quebec that can serve as both a reference for future work and as a model to emulate in studies of other struggles for educational equality. The struggle for education was a political one often battled out in the courts where concepts of fairness, justice, equality, and rights to community participation were ever evolving. Moreover, perhaps the most powerful contribution of this study is the way in which Fraser weaves his analysis of the Jewish School Question with major social questions surrounding identity, citizenship, and nationalism. Indeed, how was one to participate as a full-fledged citizen in Montreal while at the same time maintaining their distinct cultural identity when they were neither Catholic nor Protestant? Certainly they needed to be creative. With no constitutional guarantee for Jewish education, a guarantee reserved for Catholics and Protestants alone, this did not stop Jewish Montrealers from creatively staking their claim in the social life of the province and, in the realm of education, this meant becoming "honorary Protestants."

This book does have its limits. For one, the author attaches a single question, what he calls the Jewish School Question, to a broad stroke of history spanning over three centuries. The Jewish School Question was actually a series of questions that need to be understood within their own historical contexts. The linear narrative provided here supposes that the question was a singular one that Quebec policymakers and lawyers have grappled with throughout the history of Quebec, and does little to highlight the peaks and valleys of the various questions surrounding Jewish schooling in the province. Moreover, little is done in this book to connect the exhaustive legal research undertaken by the author to the broader political history of the province. Fraser's analysis remains rooted in legal dealings between the Jewish community and the school boards of Montreal. School boards were certainly central actors in the development of policies and regulations surrounding Jewish access to public education, but the provincial government was not a marginal observer. Little is here to help the reader understand the context in which the debates at the local level were situated within broader provincial reforms in education. The abolishment of the Ministry of Public Instruction in 1875, the conservative policies of the Duplessis years, and the nationalist reforms in education during the Quiet Revolution are major watersheds in the development of education in Quebec, but are unfortunately not taken into the depth of consideration they ought to have been in this book.

---

Despite these limitations, *Honorary Protestants* is a valuable new contribution to educational history that should appeal to all historians in Canada interested in understanding the intricate links between law, policy, and the social realities of public schooling. Fraser's study is a welcome addition to educational history, and has set new standards for research into the legal underpinnings of mass schooling. It will serve students and senior scholars well in the years to come.