GENDER, PROFESSION, AND PRINCIPALS: 
THE TEACHERS OF QUEBEC PROTESTANT 
ACADEMIES, 1875-1900*

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For well over a decade, Canadian educational historians have been debating 
the nineteenth-century origins of public education. The greater part of their work 
has focused on the history of Ontario public schools, and it is here that much of 
the debate over school organization has taken place. At issue is something which 
cannot be ignored by anyone wishing to study the history of public education in 
any region of the country: that is, whether local communities, school promoters, 
or the state determined public education policy. As the history of the public 
school teacher is very much part of the debate, any research on the history of 
Quebec Protestant secondary school teachers should begin with a review of the 
Ontario education historiography. 1

A second reason to address this literature is that the social history of Quebec 
Protestant secondary education, with the notable exception of the work of Wendy 
Johnston, is to this point largely undeveloped. It is well beyond the scope of this 
paper to suggest why this might be so, especially as Quebec francophone 
educational historiography flourishes. 2 For my purposes, however, the key is not 
why it developed, but how—that is, how historians determined the different 
theoretical and methodological directions chosen. The debate about the origins 
of public schools, for example, has been engaged indirectly in Quebec either 
through the popular Church versus State perspective, or in studies on the education 
of women—not the chosen path of the Ontario historian. 3 Rather than 
regretting the fact that the history of Quebec Protestant education has so much 
catching up to do, I will take the best of both worlds, gauging my approach by 
borrowing freely from two well-developed historiographies.

Among the hypotheses which have been put forward as to “who ran the 
[Ontario] schools” are a number which seem to bear directly on the formation of 
secondary school teachers. One of the earliest was that of Alison Prentice who, 
in “The Feminization of Teaching” and in The School Promoters, proposed that 
the feminization of teaching was the linchpin of public school creation and 
expansion, and that the forces behind the public school project were the school 
promoters and their ideology of reform. While Prentice used her discussion of 
class to identify the beginnings of an English Canadian identity among reformers 
closely associated with their promotion of the common schools, she also implied 
that co-existing with the ideology of common schooling were a number of schools 
which could be distinguished by their teacher hierarchies, their large tax 
resources, and their generous government grants. 4

While this social control model of public school development went far to 
challenge “traditional,” “whiggish” interpretations, it did not entirely supersede
the view that the public schools were organized to serve the needs of those who paid for and managed them. Douglas Lawr and Robert Gidney, and later, Gidney and Wyn Millar, traced the origins of secondary education policy not to the agenda of school promoters, but elsewhere: to local requests to the central education bureaucrats as to how to run the schools; and to the initiatives of “middle-class parents” who chose to support and expand public common, rather than voluntarist, schools for the advanced or secondary education of their children. Lawr, Gidney, and Millar’s point about local input is well-taken, and they have provided a large number of examples of the ways in which local school boards reworked the grammar schools to serve a wider clientele.5

Despite the provision of such examples it is hard to be convinced that central policy was a synthesis of local concerns, rather than the triumph of one among competing strategies for secondary school establishment and management. The term “middle-class” parents is problematic without a social and economic breakdown of local ratepayers. Such a breakdown would be helpful for a better understanding of “the failure of the voluntary sector to obtain sources of financial support to supplement income from fees,” and the switch of this sector to the support of public schools. It might also indicate what kinds of changes were involved in the staffing of these secondary schools and where the feminization and professionalization of teaching fit into these changes.6

As Prentice continued her research on teachers, she joined with Marta Danylewycz in the elaboration of two models of female teachers. Within the framework of the “sexual division of labour,” they saw these teachers as trained professionals in the lower levels of teacher hierarchies (below male teachers and inspectors) who were, nonetheless, in some demand in the teacher labour market. In their second model, they moved away from the study of professionalization at the higher levels, to explore the female work experience at the lowest level—the teacher with the third-class elementary diploma and the permit teacher. Using a comparative perspective which embraces two school systems—the Ontario common and the Quebec Catholic—they looked for patterns of teachers’ work which prevailed across cultural and provincial boundaries.7

Within these two models of teacher formation, Prentice and Danylewycz have recognized that whether professional or untrained, female teachers shared their perceptions of themselves and the nature of their work with their employers and the wider society. That professional training made little difference to late nineteenth-century attitudes to or remuneration for female teachers is a condition of those teachers which Prentice and Danylewycz have recognized but for which they have been unable to provide any sustained explanation.8 These attitudes might be traced to the state, or they might be traced to the teachers’ family backgrounds, or to their education in schools of all kinds—common schools, secondary schools, normal schools, and, by the end of the century, universities. Prentice’s and Danylewycz’s Ontario English Protestant/Quebec French Catholic framework might thus be re-oriented towards the differences, rather than the
similarities, between the teachers of the two provinces and the two cultural-linguistic groups.9

It is in the context of such differences that Chad Gaffield has viewed teachers in Language, Schooling and Cultural Conflict: The Origins of the French-Language Controversy in Ontario. Although Gaffield has not made teachers the main interest in his study of the Franco-Ontarian schools of late nineteenth-century Prescott County, his teachers are every bit as rooted to the demography and economy of Alford and Caledonia townships as the families which established and managed the schools. Female teachers’ work was poorly paid, a reflection of the socio-economic conditions for men and women at that time in Prescott County. Yet in many respects, provincial education policy was also upheld, showing that central and local policy, two dissimilar elements, could somehow co-exist. Yet while the exigencies of central and local policy seem partially to have been met, the ideology of public schooling so familiar in the works of Prentice and others seems never to have permeated Prescott County. Whether this is a problem of geography or methodology is something that will have to be considered in any future study of the historical demography of public school boards.10

While the teachers of Prescott County seem to have been far removed from both the power and the rhetoric of the central educational authority, Bruce Curtis’ teachers in Canada West/Ontario both submit to and exercise the “moral regulatory power” of the state in education. As an educational authority which went well beyond an ideology of school reform, this power, according to Curtis, was “normalized” in public education procedures and “internalized” by individual bureaucrats, trustees, parents, teachers, and, occasionally, pupils. It was constructed in the 1840s with the establishment of responsible government in Canada, and, with the establishment of property qualifications for the vote and the school vote, it was used to make schools a “terrain of universality and classlessness” above politics and beyond creed.11

By linking the origins of the common schools to the construction of a Canadian “public” within the British legal framework, Curtis has provided the constitutional context which has been largely absent, not from studies of the history of education in Ontario, but from the origins of public education debate.12 Curtis’ model of a creedless and classless terrain rooted in the school law and bureaucratic procedures of Canada West/Ontario is the antithesis of the late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century “free market in schooling.” Therefore it comes as somewhat of a surprise in the chapter called “Training the ‘Good’ Teacher” to discover a wide range of teacher training and experience, much of which is difficult to understand within established “bureaucratic administrative structures.”13

If these bureaucratic structures were uniformly and universally pervasive throughout the province, there would be no need for female teachers, trained or untrained, to resist from the bottom of the public school pecking order. This is not to deny the “state formation hypothesis” a certain validity, since it is difficult
to see how provincial educational policy could have been formulated outside Canadian constitutional structures. Rather, it is to suppose that the moral regulatory power of the state might have been exercised by property-holders and ratepayers who set limits on public school investment.\textsuperscript{14} If teachers had to work within these local constraints, as well as within those of the education bureaucracy, then there is more to the relationship between moral authority and ratepayer than Curtis' work suggests.

How, then, can the contradictions between the ideology of school reform, central and local policies for school organization and management, and the diversity of the local educational experience be utilized? Should agency be attributed to imposed school promoter ideology or internalized educational procedures? Should the public school board be considered as a generalized phenomenon or as existing in a given historical demographic context? Ideology as imposition or internalization separates the work of Curtis and the early work of Prentice; yet Prentice's work on teachers has sought to make room for both. Policy as consensus versus "partial convergence" separates the work of Gidney, Lawr, and Millar from that of Gaffield.\textsuperscript{15} Yet the sum total of the evidence suggests that the work experience of late nineteenth-century secondary school teachers cannot be understood outside of the contradictions of ideology, policy, and local context.

This is the view which is put forward in Susan Houston and Prentice's \textit{Schooling and Scholars in Nineteenth-Century Ontario}. They have based this monograph on the premise that "virtually any social policy...has diverse purposes that are rarely so coherent as to lend themselves to treatment as a single force." Drawing on a wealth of primary sources, and with particular attention to the nineteenth-century meanings of the words used in the public schooling debate in Ontario, they insist that diversity and uneven development characterize public school organization. They have recognized that the social control thesis is too narrow, and that there are practical difficulties in studying schooling at the local level (such as in the area of financing).\textsuperscript{16} In their chapter on teachers, "Forging a public school teaching force," they have paid particular attention to the diffusion of normal school theory and practice, and have thereby kept alive the debate over how teacher labour markets work.\textsuperscript{17}

Houston and Prentice have made the task of updating Quebec Protestant educational history both easier and more difficult. It is easier because the transformation of schooling to school systems cannot be approached without an understanding of the era of schooling. It is more difficult because at a time when the study of Ontario schools has reached this advanced level, the history of Quebec Protestant education is at an elementary stage.

For this reason it is a tall order to describe the teachers of the Quebec Protestant academies between 1875 and 1900 in other than suggestive, introductory terms. Therefore this study will do the following: distinguish the priorities of secondary from elementary education; attempt to link the history of women's education with the history of public education; and point out where the feminiza-
tion of teaching fits on the elementary-secondary continuum. In their study of
the education of girls, Quebec francophone educational historians have raised a
number of questions related to the connection between the education of girls and
the structures of private and public late nineteenth/early twentieth-century
Catholic education. They have wondered about the weakness of the Catholic
public secondary school sector in the first two decades of the twentieth century,
and the persistence of private (as opposed to public) education for girls, especially
with regard to teacher training.18 With a slight variation, this model raises the
possibility that the entry of Quebec English Protestant women into higher
education provided the teacher supply for Protestant secondary schools and the
larger elementary schools, and that an entirely different labour market was
created for one-room common schools.

The establishment of the Quebec Protestant secondary school system took
place in the same decade—the 1880s—in which women were admitted to the arts
faculty of McGill University. This conjunctures of events produced a temporary
discrepancy between the formal education of Montreal women and the teaching
opportunities for women in Quebec Protestant schools. In 1878, a handful of
women graduated from the McGill Normal School with the Academy Diploma.
Since the requirements for this Diploma included an introduction to the classics
(a course of study not available to women anywhere else in Montreal) these
women were qualified for entrance to the Bachelor of Arts programme when
McGill opened its doors to women in 1884. They received their degrees in 1888
and from that moment were among the best qualified candidates for teaching in
the Protestant public schools. Yet, with one notable exception, they took posi-
tions in common schools, model schools, the Girls’ High School of Montreal, or
as assistants in the academies.19 The case of the exception, a Montreal teacher
named Elizabeth Binmore, is perhaps the only hint we have that the regulations
for women teachers might have been adjusted to prevent them from holding the
positions for which they were trained.

Elizabeth Binmore has frequently been cited for both her outstanding
scholastic achievements and her activism on behalf of teachers’ pensions and
higher salaries for female teachers. Yet those who have cited her have not pieced
together these two sides of her career.20 In addition to her Academy Diploma
and her B.A. from McGill, Binmore obtained an A.B. from Harvard and received
one of the first two Masters in Arts awarded to women at McGill. Yet with the
exception of the years 1890 to 1892, all her teaching until her death in 1917 was
spent in the elementary schools of Montreal and its immediate districts. Between
1890 and 1892, Binmore tried to exercise her right to be an academy principal at
Clarenceville Academy in the Eastern Townships, but she only lasted two
years.21

To understand Binmore’s situation, it is necessary to outline briefly the
mandate of the McGill Normal School from its founding in 1857 and the
formulation of secondary school policy by the Protestant Committee of the
Council of Public Instruction after 1875. The Normal School was distinct from
the other educational institutions in English Protestant Quebec in three respects. From its founding until 1875, it was the only school with an established course of study—one which progressed from the elementary to the Model School to the Academy Diploma. It was also the only one to offer a course in the “Art of Teaching” as well as codes of behaviour for female and male English-speaking public school teachers; and, in proportion to the English Protestant population of Quebec, its annual grant exceeded that of any English Protestant school including McGill College.22 We can also say that, on paper at least, the Normal School provided women with both elementary and higher learning, and a set of female teacher behaviours.

The mandate of the Normal School was expanded after 1875 with the restructuring of Quebec education. As has been shown in the history of education in Ontario, the roots of public secondary schools reached back into the early nineteenth century. This was also true for English Protestant Quebec, where government support to independently managed colleges, high schools, academies, and model schools can be traced back to 1816. The first two academies were founded in 1829 in the Eastern Townships and, modelled on the New England academy, provided instruction to boys and girls. In 1846, mandatory tax support of common schools, both Protestant and Catholic, became law; almost from that moment, the Protestant common schools competed for pupils with the voluntarist academies. From 1846 until Confederation, both the academies and the common schools increased in number, the former by obtaining the government superior school grant, and the latter by expanding their tax revenues. One or two Protestant school boards were able to obtain superior school grants and, in combination with their tax resources, maintain an academy as well as a number of common schools. As the central education bureaucracy developed its “normalizing procedures,” it came to view the academies which were not based upon public school tax support as inferior educational institutions. Therefore, in the education settlement which was initiated in the 1867 Constitution Act and finalized in the 1869 Quebec Education Act, the government grants to Protestant academies were reduced by 40% to 60%.23

The grant cutbacks forced a number of academies to close their doors, so that by 1875 the academies were more or less divided between those which were managed by publicly elected school commissioners and those which remained under independent boards. The Protestant Committee of the Council of Public Instruction, in the exercise of its autonomous authority over Quebec Protestant education, introduced the first of many measures to bring uniformity to the rural academies. Under the leadership of John William Dawson, the Principal of McGill College and the past Principal of the McGill Normal School, the Committee brought the examinations of the local boards of examinations for candidate teachers into line with the requirements of the McGill Normal School teaching diplomas, and created university entrance examinations (called the Associate in Arts) for rural academy pupils. As in Ontario, the Committee flirted briefly with
“payment by [examination] results” and abandoned the policy shortly thereafter.24

In the second stage of reform—a stage which is identified with the school promoter initiatives of English Protestant Quebec’s answer to Egerton Ryerson, the Reverend Elson I. Rexford—the independent academies which continued to receive government grants and to hire “unprofessional” teachers came under attack as incompetent. As part of the reform of all publicly supported schools (academies, model schools, and common schools), it was proposed that all academies should be public secondary schools under the control of commissioners who hired professionally trained teachers and followed the official Protestant Course of Study. In the early 1880s, regulations were prepared to divide the academies into three departments (Academy, Model, and Elementary), and academy boards were to hire a teacher for each department with the corresponding diploma. The academy principal (and head of the academy department) was to be a graduate of a Canadian university and a normal school graduate. If the boards did not move to hire the necessary teachers, their academies risked demotion to model (intermediate) status. Secondly, if they did not implement the Official Course of Study, including the ten-month school year and annual June examinations, they risked the loss of their grants.25

The departmentalization of the academies was complemented by the rigid classification of Protestant schools into three categories: academy, model school, and elementary school. Commissioners who administered model schools were required to hire two teachers, one of whom held a model school diploma, while the elementary school could get by with one trained teacher. The classification was designed to encourage school boards which managed, or aspired to manage, academies to hire male teachers with both a Canadian or British university degree and an Academy Diploma.26

Not surprisingly, these policies met with resistance from the academies which received government grants and which were in the charge of male principals whose credentials did not conform to the proposed regulations. These men were not trained teachers in the normal school sense, but college graduates who often had an occupation in addition to teaching. Their female assistant teachers were their graduates, certified by the nearest board of examiners. The new regime threatened to replace the local teachers with professionally trained outsiders, male and female, and to replace the flexible curriculum with a school year which pupils who were required on family farms during planting and harvesting could not complete.27

Through the 1880s, the independent academy principals and their supporters voiced these concerns at public meetings in many of the academy towns. However, by 1889 the proposed reforms had passed into law, and the last academies had complied with the regulations. Whether they preserved their academy status depended on their ability to afford to hire the mandatory three teachers, including the professionally trained male academy head. Those which, when forced to “go public,” did so in a municipality with a strong tax base,
received the benefit of both taxes and government grant. Those boards forced into submission in poorer municipalities had their academies demoted to model school status.28 It is at this time that the overqualified female teachers from McGill College and the McGill Normal School put a wrinkle in the Protestant school promoter agenda. In the original conception of the regulations, it was not envisaged that women teachers would be qualified to preside as principals of the academies. It was sufficient to specify that academy principals be graduates of a Canadian university, since women were not admitted to Canadian universities in the early 1880s. The regulation was designed to promote the interest of the “new breed” of educator, and to supereede the male academy teachers, particularly those in the Eastern Townships, who held degrees from American colleges. As well, women had never served as principals of the academies under former conditions, so there was no precedent there to overcome. Yet by 1888 and the graduation of the first class of women from McGill University, there were a number of women who, on paper, qualified as academy principals.

The members of the Protestant Committee moved immediately to plug the loophole in the regulations. They divided the academy diploma into first, second, and third class, with the first class including classics at the university level. They then removed the teaching of Greek and Latin from the Normal School to the university, making it difficult for women to meet the entrance requirements for a first-class academy diploma. Women were encouraged to substitute French or German for Greek in their Bachelor of Arts programmes; when they did so they qualified for academy diplomas, second-class, but not as academy principals.29

Elizabeth Binmore, nonetheless, with her bona fide academy diploma obtained in 1878, did a two-year tour of duty at Clarenceville Academy before its board was caught up in the “Catch-22” of academy regulations. The board hired her because they could afford her salary as a woman (but not that of a male counterpart), and provided her with one assistant in her first year of teaching and two in her second. However, it is evident from the records of the Protestant Committee that because Clarenceville Academy could not afford a male teacher with two assistants, the Committee did not recognize its right to academy status. In 1893, the school was unranked and the recipient of a special grant; the following year, it was demoted to model school status, and employed a female principal with an academy diploma, second-class. In the meantime, Binmore had obtained her Harvard A.B. and her McGill Master of Arts degree. As an active member of the Montreal Teachers’ Association and the Provincial Association of Protestant Teachers of Quebec, and as an advocate of teachers’ pensions and higher women’s salaries, she never publicly called attention to the discrepancy between her qualifications and her status as a teacher.30

After 1893, the hiring of academy and model school principals worked more or less as the school reformers had intended. The positions in the more prestigious academies were reserved for male Canadian and British professionally trained graduates, while the women teachers were hired as the heads of the model
departments in academies, the principals of model schools, and as teachers at the Girls’ High School of Montreal. Once the most influential independent male academy principals had been removed from their schools, a small number of lesser lights were reinstated and provided with new academy appointments.\textsuperscript{31}

Other aspects of the regulations, particularly those governing the high school leaving examinations, were a source of embarrassment to the Protestant Committee and to the Superior School Inspectors responsible for their enforcement. A number of academies were caught cheating on the annual examinations; and certain model schools had to be advised not to teach beyond the model school curriculum, because when they did they obtained better results than some of the academies. When it came time to award the annual superior school grants, Committee members found it far less tedious to recognize schools for excellence in school-building and property-maintenance rather than for the excellence of their examination results.\textsuperscript{32}

More serious than the unintended consequences of school reform was the deterioration of (or at least the failure to improve) the one-room elementary schools after 1889. While the elementary departments of academies and model schools participated in the benefits of the priority given to superior schools in funding and programmes by the central education authorities, the one-room schools experienced widespread teacher shortages for which no rural teacher training sessions or Institutes could compensate. Furthermore, it was official policy that if the one room schools could not meet elementary standards, it was the fault not of policy but of rural parents and boards. Admitting that just twenty-five per cent of Protestant elementary teachers were trained, Rexford put it this way in 1890: "It is not too much to say that the continued existence of the Protestant minority is closely bound up with the maintenance of efficient elementary schools." Yet the question could be raised as to whether the reforms of the 1880s had destroyed the academy as the training ground for rural elementary female teachers.\textsuperscript{33}

By contrast, school boards which administered model schools found the financial resources to hire first-class diploma male academy principals in order to obtain academy status. In other words, they had the funds to hire a first-class principal before they had obtained the Protestant Committee academy grant. Nor was it unheard of in the 1890s for school boards to have obtained these additional funds from private companies managed by English Protestants and from other private sources. Most of the first-class principals circulated among the academies and the aspiring academies, moving every two years from one position to another. At the same time, academies like Clarenceville Academy, which had operated since 1843 but which could not afford to hire a qualified teacher for each of their three departments, lost their academy grant and status. The hiring of a cheaper, female, second-class academy diploma principal was a sure indication that an academy was on the road to demotion.\textsuperscript{34}

In Montreal, the teacher hierarchies were a wealthier, larger version of their rural and suburban counterparts. In that the Protestant Board of School Commis-
sioners of Montreal had a tax base which ensured it near-financial independence, women teachers were better paid than their rural sisters. At the Girls' High School and in the larger elementary schools, they had positions of authority—at least over other women. Yet Rexford, despite the many bureaucratic and teaching positions which he had held, could not resist a stint as Principal of the Girls' High School, where he believed he assumed almost patriarchal proportions.

The debate over the origins of public schools in Ontario has provided a number of valuable leads as to how to study the ideology of school reform, the formulation of provincial policy, the local organization of common and secondary schools, and the feminization of teaching. As this analysis of the establishment of the Quebec Protestant secondary school system has tried to suggest, the feminization of teaching remains a central problem in the study of all other aspects of nineteenth-century school organization and re-organization, especially theorizing about the public and private educational realms. Quebec francophone historians are wrestling with this problem as they study the social construction of teaching in the girls' academies and convents. It is difficult to know whether the entrance in the 1880s of women to McGill University and of female professional teachers into the lower levels of the Protestant teacher hierarchy was a coincidence or whether there is a link here which could be more systematically pursued. It is also difficult to assess the constitutional and cultural origins of public schooling—which Curtis has so carefully identified with the origins of responsible government—with reference to the history of Quebec Protestant education, and to know at what time Quebec anglophones may be construed as exercising minority education rights. There is still much to be learned about the financing of school boards, the training and hiring of teachers, and about the dialectic between education policymakers in Montreal and Quebec City and those in the Protestant school municipalities outside of these two cities. Even though, or perhaps because, Quebec anglophone educational history is still in its infancy, the origins of public education debate remains very much alive.

NOTES

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9. For such an orientation see Fahmy-Eid, “Un univers articulé.”


15. Gaffield, Language, Schooling, and Cultural Conflict, 188.


23. For the details of the founding period of these academies, from 1829 to 1863, and their "eclipse" between 1863 and 1875, see Drummond, "From Autonomous Academy," chaps. 2 and 3, 16-79.


30. Educational Record 14 (1894), 303-46; Prentice, "Feminization of Teaching," 64.


34. See, for example, Canadian Gleaner, 2 Jan. 1896; Report, 1895-96, 238-41; 1899-1900, 280-83.