

Jack D. Cecillon

Prayers, Petitions, and Protests: The Catholic Church and the Ontario Schools Crisis in the Windsor Border Region, 1910–1928

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. 367 pp.

Françoise Noël

Nipissing University

Police pushing through a barricade of angry protesters and hitting older women with their batons: this is not an image one would ordinarily associate with the usually devout French Canadian Catholics of Ontario. How could the relationship between a duly appointed parish priest and his parishioners reach a point where a riot ensued when he attempted to take possession of his parish? The Ford City Riot of 8 September 1917 may have lasted only twenty minutes, but this moment of open revolt against the dictates of Bishop Fallon of London was much longer in the making, and not soon forgotten. In what we learn from Cecillon's book was a deeply divided francophone community in the Windsor border region, the riot stands out as a moment of unity when a shared anger at the Bishop's choice of a successor to one of his chief opponents brought various factions together. The underlying cause of the discontent, however, was the Bishop's stand on French language education and his opposition to bilingual schools. *Prayers, Petitions, and Protests* examines, not only the Ford City Riot, but also the social and demographic context in which this controversy emerged; Bishop Fallon's actions in attempting to crush opposition to his position; and the divisions and infighting among the French Canadian nationalists of Windsor.

The francophone population of the Windsor region was not homogeneous but consisted of two distinct sub-cultures: the Fort Detroit French, descendants of French soldiers and trappers who had been there for generations, and more recent French Canadian arrivals from Quebec. Urbanization added to the stresses on this francophone population that was integrating into the anglophone work world at the turn

of the twentieth century. Using census information from 1901, Cecillon suggests that there were only “modest signs of language transfer” (27), but that illiteracy rates were high—especially in rural areas. Controversies over bilingual schools predated the appointment of Michael Francis Fallon as Bishop of London in 1909. With his appointment, however, the situation changed. Fallon adopted a policy of opposition to bilingual schools and supported the cultural integration of francophone children into English-speaking society. His fear was that the problems of bilingual schools would lead to the dismantlement of the Catholic school system. This stand was reluctantly accepted by the majority of the priests in his diocese. A minority of French Canadian nationalists, including Lucien Beaudoin, resisted.

When the province-wide restrictions on French language instruction in Ontario’s bilingual schools, known as Regulation 17, were applied in 1912, the situation in Windsor became even more complex and tense. The Bishop took measures to impose his authority over the nationalist priests while the Association canadienne-française d’éducation d’Ontario (ACFEO) urged local schools to resist Regulation 17. While not every school resisted, Bishop Fallon’s actions alienated a growing number of French Canadians. Many attributed the sudden death of Father Beaudoin to the stress caused to the father by Fallon’s campaign against him. It was the choice of his replacement, a priest who had sat on the tribunal against Beaudoin—announced the day of Beaudoin’s funeral—that rallied the population into open resistance and led to the Ford City Riot in 1917. Although passions were high at that time and the boycott of new parish priest lasted a year, in the end, the resistance could not be maintained indefinitely. Slowly, people returned to their parish church. Fallon, although publicly supported by the papacy, was privately chastised and ordered to take a more conciliatory approach.

By 1918, school inspectors reported that all bilingual schools in the Windsor area were in compliance with Regulation 17. A secret report by the ACFEO suggested that some resistance continued in a few schools, but many seemed apathetic to the language question. A 1920 ruling by the Holy Roman Rota on Fallon’s actions upheld the authority of the Bishop and Church and held out little hope for the nationalists. The reduction of French in the schools was being felt in the region as the younger generation became increasingly disassociated from the francophone culture. To counter these changes, the creation of an independent bilingual school was promoted by the more militant nationalists; moderate leaders, however, favoured a more gradualist approach to restore cultural pride.

The opening of École Jeanne d’Arc in Windsor did not end the warring between the nationalist factions and divisions hampered fundraising efforts and support for the school from outside organizations. In 1923 Club LaSalle was created as a rival approach to the problem of cultural integration. Visits in 1924 by high profile Quebec personalities, Abbé Lionel Groulx and Henri Bourassa, only added to the divisions. Resistance to Regulation 17 in other parts of the province, efforts by the Unity League to promote a better understanding between francophone and anglophone Canadians, and a growing awareness that Regulation 17 was not working, finally led to its effective end in 1927. In the Windsor region, however, Regulation 17

was considered to have been a success. Cecillon concludes that “[t]he inability of the resistance leaders to overcome their differences and unite to support one financially viable independent school ensured the failure of the most promising act of defiance in the city of Windsor against Regulation 17” (229).

As the origins and impact of Regulation 17 have largely been studied in the Ottawa region in the past, this study is a welcome addition to the literature. The author maintains a fairly neutral view of the actions of that controversial figure, Bishop Michael Fallon, when describing the events that unfolded; but in his conclusion, he refers to Fallon’s “aggression,” (233) his “brazen authoritarianism” (235) and concludes that he “lacked the empathy and diplomacy to serve as the Bishop of a diocese with so many francophones” (236). Cecillon’s examination of the divisions within the ranks of the nationalist leadership is an interesting example of the problems of politically mobilizing a cultural minority and the difficulties that arise when leaders are seen as outsiders rather than insiders. This detailed and well-researched study of the Ontario schools crisis in the Windsor area has much to offer to readers interested in education, religion, and minority cultures.