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In Quest of Splendour

PREFACE

This novel was written for and about French Canadians. Their educational system figures largely in it, and is different enough from the American or English to require explanation. It differs both in content and in structure. Its content represents an heroic effort to retain as much as possible of the universal humanities, conceived as requisite for all educated men, and at the same time to keep decently abreast of the modern push toward specialization. This struggle, of course, has marked education everywhere in the modern world; no more in French Canada than elsewhere has it reached any final resolution. For obvious historical reasons, however, the resistance of the humanities has been tougher here than in many other lands.

The structural differences are the ones that count most for understanding this book. It must be remembered that until recently there was no compulsory education in the Province of Quebec. For the very reason that they were not compulsory when they were first established, the primary and universal grades are of shorter duration than is usual elsewhere–six years. These are the only free years; after that, though they are not high, there are fees.

The secondary years are about double the length ususal in English-speaking countries–at least eight years and, in the case of the sciences, as much as ten. The newcomers in the secondary field are the schools for "practical" subjects–the trades, agriculture, commerce, domestic economy–in certain cases leading to the possibility of more advanced work in each speciality at the university level. But the real core of the secondary system is the "classical course," given in the "Petits Séminaires" operated by diocesan priest and in the generally younger "Collèges," operated by the religious orders. The same course for girls is available in convent schools. Until a half decade ago this classical course was absolutely uniform throughout the Province; a slight differentiation, based upon aptitude, is now the rule for the last four years, but it is a differentiation of emphasis more than of matter. Every aspirant to professions in any sense "learned"–the priesthood, the law, medicine, engineering

of any sort–or to a university degree in the arts or sciences, must successfully conclude the "cours classique." He is then ready for university work in theology, the law, or the humanities; for the sciences he must either have done enough on his own to pass the special entrance examinations, or he must take a year or two more of "pre-scientific" work before he can enter the university.

English readers must be specially warned against the clerical connotations of the word "seminary" and the non-clerical connotations of the word "college." Schools going by either name prepare equally for entrance to the university, and both enrol students aiming at any profession or degree for which the "classical course" is a prerequisite.

Of course in translating the book it would have been easier to cheat–and leave out this explanation. For "Petit Séminaire" (Minor Seminary) I could have given "high school," "academy," or "college." But to have done so would have led readers to miss the point. Psychologically everything depends on the fact that, in finishing his studies at the Minor Seminary, Pierre has become an adult. He is, being precocious, nineteen; he could easily have been twenty or twenty-one. He is through being a "sophomore." He has had fourteen years of schooling and he is ready either for the world or for professional training. In the United States he would be half-way through "college" or all through "junior college"; in England or English-speaking Canada he would be well on his way to a bachelor's degree. In French Quebec he has his "baccalauréat" and has had about two years more than the secondary education in most other countries.

The university, then, is wholly devoted to specialties, with its various "faculties," "schools," and "institutes," all parts of the greater university corporation and community, yet each a law unto itself. The "Grand Séminaire" in Quebec, which is a specialized institution educating exclusively for the priesthood, happens historically to be the senior university faculty in that city. It is really the faculty of theology of Laval University, but being a great deal older than the University itself, it retains its original name and has, perhaps, a slight tendency to dwell upon its autonomy and seemingly to minimize the fact that it is a constituent part of a larger whole. Being the oldest, it is likewise the wealthiest faculty, and in recent years has played a most generous part in meeting the deficits of the University as

a whole.

Another point that should be made depends on the peculiar nature of French-Canadian culture: it is intensely close-knit and homogeneous, if far from united. Its society is small and cannot support a great diversity of institutions–schools or universities. In a sense it is one big family, since all are descended from a handful of ancestors. The result is a general democracy whose snobbery is based wholly on money or position. In a word, there is no *noblesse*, there are no peasants. There are the rich, the well-placed, the comfortable, and the poor. And the vast majority are, by general standards, if not by French-Canadian, cousins. Hence Pierre and Yvon could scarcely escape each other, and Madame Letellier's snobbery is peculiarly shocking, since she might, without knowing it, easily be blood kin to those she thinks so far beneath her.

One final word about the language in which *Pierre le Magnifique* is written. Those who know only "French" French might wonder at certain things if ever they were to take the trouble to compare my translation with the original. Canadian French is a youthful and lively language, just like American English, and it has its meanings and nuances unknown to the mother tongue.

Source : *In Quest of Splendour*, Pointe au Pic, Spring 1954, p. 7-10.