
Félix Desrochers: General Librarian 1933-1956

by Ross Gordon

The Library of Parliament is one of the country's great intellectual resources. For many years it was Canada's National Library. Since the mid 1960s it has been a centre of information and research dedicated to providing Members of Parliament with the tools they need to perform their duties. Despite its importance to the public life of Canada little has been written about the history of the institution or the individuals who lead it. This article looks at the life of Felix Desrochers who served as General Librarian from 1933 -1956.

For many years the Library of Parliament had a system of dual Librarians or "duelling Librarians" depending upon how one viewed this structure. As shown in the accompanying table there was always an English and a French Librarian. One was the Parliamentary Librarian, the other the General Librarian.

This arrangement lasted for nearly sixty years and served two purposes. One was to keep the English-French balance in place. This was especially important in the early days of the Parliamentary Library which had been born out of the combined collections of Lower and Upper Canada and had spent time located in Montreal, Toronto, Quebec and Kingston. But the second reason

was as important, Canada did not have a National Library and the Library of Parliament was in many ways seen as the *de facto* National Library. The existence of a dual library system was a political response to competing needs, as is often seen in Canadian history. Félix Desrocher was a beneficiary of this odd system.

The Appointment of Félix Desrochers

How does one get appointed to high office? This is often a mystery that we simply cannot answer. We can wonder, we can speculate, but we cannot know for sure what happened. With Félix Desrochers, we not only know how he got the job, I believe that he wanted us to know. He was not in the least shy about this and he even left us a file labelled: *Desrochers, Félix-Library of Parliament - Appointment (campaign for this position)*.¹

In late 1931 he began a fight for the job of General Librarian that would use up all of the political capital he had built up over 25 years of service to the Conservative Party of Canada. He wrote letters to influential friends and politicians, beginning with Prime Minister R.B. Ben-

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nett, seeking help in landing the best Librarian job in Canada open to a French Canadian.

The General Librarian of Parliament, Joseph de la Broquerie Taché had announced his impending retirement. In the world of dual librarianships, based upon linguistic characteristics and geography as much as on actual experience, Félix, a lawyer by training, saw this as an opportunity to move up in the world.

Parliamentary and General Librarians Since Confederation

<p>The first <i>Library of Parliament Act</i> was given Royal assent April 14, 1871. Staff consisted of one librarian and one assistant librarian as well as two clerks and two messengers. On May 6, 1885, a resolution was passed in the House of Commons that "the officers and servants of the Library of Parliament should consist of two officers, one to be called the General Librarian, the other the Parliamentary Librarian, and to hold a joint commission as "Librarians of Parliament" and to have equal powers..." This was amended in 1955. The Parliamentary Librarian was given "the control and management of the Library" while the position of General Librarian was changed to that of Associate Parliamentary Librarian who would "perform the duties and functions of Parliamentary Librarian during his absences, illness or during a vacancy in the office of Parliamentary Librarian</p>	
Parliamentary Librarian	General Librarian
<p>Alpheus Todd 1854 - 1884 Became Parliamentary Librarian after Confederation.</p>	
<p>Martin Joseph Griffith 1885-1920</p>	<p>A.D. DeCelles 1885-1920 From 1880-1885 he was Assistant Librarian and then in 1885 became the First General Librarian</p>
<p>Martin S. Burrell 1920-1938</p>	<p>Joseph de la Broquerie Taché 1920-1932</p>
<p>Francis A. Hardy 1944-1959 Appointed Assistant Librarian in 1936 and Parliamentary Librarian in 1944.</p>	<p>Felix Desrochers 1933-1956 After Burrell's death, the government left his position open. Desrochers performed both functions, from 1938 until 1944.</p>
	<p>Associate Librarians</p>
<p>Erik Spicer 1960 - 1994</p>	<p>Guy Sylvestre 1956-1968 Gilles Frappier 1970-1979 Richard Paré 1980-1994</p>
<p>Richard Paré 1994- present</p>	

There was another reason to make a move: his position as the Civic Librarian of Montreal, under Mayor Houde's administration, had come to an end when changes in the administration, from 'bleu' to 'rouge', caused him to be demoted to assistant librarian. He was politically on the outside now in Montreal.

After being tipped off by his friend Taché about the imminent opening, Félix sent an updated resume to Prime Minister Bennett, listing every political campaign he had been in or otherwise helped to organise from 1908 to 1930. In all he had taken part in some 35 municipal, provincial and federal electoral battles and felt that he had more than paid his dues to the Conservative Party. He had even organised the convention of 1929 that had nominated Camile Houde as leader of the provincial party. In this rather long letter of December 21, 1931, (typed on the official stationery of the Library of the City of Montreal), he noted that:

You can realise through the reading of this summary, I believe, that I have done more than my share for our party. And kindly note that I have fought all these campaigns from beginning to the end, and in most cases without any remuneration. I may say like Flambeau, in Rostand's *L'Aiglon*, I fought for glory and ...prunes.

After describing his work in the Montreal library where he was a "man of action" he got to the point:

I have never requested anything for myself personally from my friends in Ottawa, this is the first time that I do it. I trust that in the past I have done enough for the party to command recognition and hope that now the party should do its share for me, and more specially when the occasion offers itself to an act of recognition for past services in nominating one of our own who naturally possesses, while being a lawyer and a librarian, all the required qualifications for the position of Parliamentary Librarian.....I submit that it is only a promotion that I do request. I could have, like several other defeated candidates in the past, let my personal ambitions reach higher and solicit a position of Judge or Senator or Commissioner, but I have confined myself to apply for a position more in line with my own competency and qualification. I wish I could have kept on fighting the political campaigns, but I could not do it any more, having spent therein the best of my health.

He wrote as well to the three French Canadian ministers Sauvé, Duranleau and Dupré, almost identical letters, and made a final point to all of them: "I know and I think enough of you to believe that you shall do your utmost to reward one who has sacrificed the best twenty five years of his life to the interest of the party...and whose competency as a Librarian cannot be disputed." He had been a librarian for less than three years at that point.

Prime Minister Bennett wrote back confirming that Félix was on the right track by going straight to the Minis-

ters from his province. Félix did not stop there, he wrote to the Secretary of State of Canada, C.H. Cahan on January 13th, 1932. In almost an identical copy of the first letter, he pressed his case. On January 14th he wrote two letters, one in English to Sir George Perley that is the same as the others, including the quotation on fighting 'for Glory and prunes'. The other in French was sent to P.E. Blondin, Speaker of the Senate. He was more direct, more than in the English letter:

I understand the importance of timing and that is why I am writing to you now. At our last discussion I understood that you were favourably disposed towards Séraphin Marion of Ottawa, a very intelligent and well educated young man...

But this time he added something that the English letters lacked. He alluded to the conscription crisis in Quebec in 1917 when his identification with the federal government made him unpopular. He was to mention this again in other letters, but never in those that he wrote in English. The divide between those who understood such a sacrifice and those who would not was clear. He told M Blondin in no uncertain terms that he had earned the right to his reward, for service to the party, above and beyond the call of duty, over a 25 year period, and that young Marion (Séraphin) had not put in his time.

In any campaign for such high office there may be jealous rivals and brutal fighting and this battle started to become dirty.

The first sign of trouble for Félix arrived in the form of an article published on January 7, 1932 in *Le Canada* which asked whether Aegidius Fauteux or Desrochers was better qualified to succeed Mr. Taché

Félix found it very offensive. His inside track on the job had slipped away very publicly. He wrote to the retiring and ailing M. Taché who by then was in the hospital, to complain that someone was up to something. His campaign was close to running aground as there were other prominent French Canadian candidates being publicly discussed and pushing themselves forward including: Ernest Bilodeau, Louvigny de Montigny, J.L.K Laflamme as well as Séraphin Marion, and Aegidius Fauteux. Not only were they moving in on his job, some of them had a great deal of experience as Librarians. How was he to compete with these men? To the ailing Taché he once more drove home this point: Félix did not just want this job, he was *owed* this job by the Conservative party which had taken the very best years of his life.

Other MPs were approached, indeed every Conservative French Canadian member who could put in a word received a short letter. To some, such as Speaker Blondin he was relentless. Having received no response to his first letter he sent another with a copy of the first, re-typed, tacked on to it. He also wrote to Postmaster General Arthur Sauvé retelling the tale of his brave campaign of 1916 when he ran for office in the county of St-Hyacinthe.

By May 1932 things still looked bad for Félix. He had written to the Minister of Mines in the Ontario Government, something of a stretch it would seem but his connections in Quebec and Ottawa were not paying off as he had hoped. The letter began in this way: "My dear Minister, Mr. J. de L. Taché, Joint Librarian of the Parliamentary Library, is dead. His position is now vacant."

Charles McCrea was told his forlorn tale and how he had fought for "Glory and...prunes". A month later McCrea promised that he would write a letter to Bennett but he cautioned that: "I should say to you frankly, however, that in writing such a letter, while I know that the powers at Ottawa appreciate me, this is a matter within the Province of Quebec and the influence must come through the parties to whom you have written, namely Messrs. Sauve, Duranleau and Dupré."

Others were enlisted in the battle, Félix Desrochers had not worked in 35 political campaigns for nothing. Minister Sauvé was approached by a party organiser named G.N. Pichet who reminded him, again, that Félix had fought a great battle for St Hyacinth in 1916 and had lost by only 250 votes in a Liberal stronghold. In 1923 he was the strongest supporter of Dr. Beaudoin who won in St.-Jacques. In the campaign of 1927 Félix had fought like a lion, making three speeches a day and on certain Sundays, up to five! When he entered municipal campaigns in 1928 and 1930 in Lafontaine, he knew he would lose, but fought for the party anyway.

That Félix kept copies of this correspondence shows how close he was to the campaign. In some cases he may have actually written these 'testimonials' sent by friends and admirers. They often do not have signatures on them, showing that he has the carbon copy of the original in his files.

In April 1932 Félix Desrochers wrote to another Quebec MP, Sam Gobeil to push his cause. But now he was getting angry. 'Where is my payback for service?' he demanded. Gobeil's response was short and concise. There was no news, except that another candidate had entered the race: Dr. Paquette.

It continued, with letters to Minister Duranleau in May 1932, in which he made it clear that he did not just fight on behalf of the Conservative Party during the very unhappy years of the War, and afterwards, but had been

persecuted by the Club de Réforme which continues attempting to destroy him politically and publicly. While he was at it, he reminded the Minister that Aegedius Fauteux was more likely a Rouge (Liberal) than a Bleu (Conservative.) Félix was feeling the heat of a municipal enquiry that, he said, sought to ruin him and he had to get out of Montréal soon.

The next day, writing to the Honourable Judge Louis Cousineau in Aylmer he asked the Judge to see Bennett and Meighen that week to discuss the problems he was facing in the press. There was a negative publicity campaign being waged against him in Montreal by his political enemies who hoped to push him out of the Library there. But while he was at it, Félix mentioned in passing that he noticed the salary of a deputy minister was now \$8,000 an "isn't it about time the Librarian of Parliament got that as?"

Another article by Olivar Asselin in *Le Canada* supporting Aegidius Fauteux for the position was published and this set off a flurry of letters by Desrochers asking his supporters if they were now taking their patronage orders from a 'Rouge' like Asselin. To several of them he noted that while Fauteux was called a 'Bleu', he is the kind of 'Bleu' beloved by Liberals, more of a 'tender rose colour' that likes to see the Conservatives stay defeated in Quebec, as they have been for 35 years.

Desrochers suggested a way that the Joint Committee of the Library could get him in on a quick vote. As for Fauteux he could have Félix's job in Montreal. That should make everyone happy. This was a new tactic and Félix ran with it. In letters to sympathetic Ministers he outlined his painful humiliation in the daily press in Montreal, which had already declared him finished as a municipal librarian. On top of this, the *Montreal Gazette* reported that an assembly of librarians in Quebec had chosen Aegedius Fauteux to replace M. Desrochers at the Municipal library while Félix was still holding on to the job.

All through June letters of support were obtained from both English and French friends including: Abbé Etienne Blanchard, Murray Hayes, Bishop J.A. Desmarais, M. le Chanoine Émile Chartier, Vice-recteur of l'Université de Montréal and so on.

But, the wheels of government turned very slowly. Nothing happened that summer. Prime Minister Bennett had promised a decision before leaving for Europe in September. The job had seemed to be his, the Governor General in Council had approved his nomination but there was a strange silence throughout autumn until the reason came out.

Félix Desrochers had been accused of having a dark secret in his past and it was brought to light at a most inopportune time.

He was accused of having incited a conscript to not report for duty in the First World War. The accusation was that he had provided a forged pass, to a conscript and that he, Félix Desrochers, had been arrested in September 1918 and brought before the courts.

In a long and passionate defence, both typed and written out longhand and kept in his file, he gave R. B. Bennett his version of the tale. He had been framed, in a conspiracy set out by his political enemies with whom he had been battling for years.

The election campaigns in Quebec were often rough, but the one in 1916 was among the worst. Illegitimate means were prevalent in his fight against M. Bouchard, who was now Speaker of the Provincial House. Having beaten Desrochers by only 240 votes, Bouchard the Liberal was furious and vengeful. The conscription crisis, which arrived soon after put Félix in a very bad position. He had to fight his way physically out of some close scrapes. The feeling against the Borden government was high in the province. They went even higher when Félix accepted the position, in 1918, of military representative before the courts. That was when the vengeful Bouchard and "other liberals at the Reform Club, conspired to brand me as a criminal in the opinion of the public." For this purpose he secured the co-operation of the late Mr. Hibbard, Mr. Louis Gosselin, and Mr. Victor B. a sworn enemy of olden days since the time he was liberal leader in the Mock Parliament where I was leading the Conservative members".

All these facts were corroborated by sworn statements. After his arrest, without warrant, Félix had been put into solitary confinement on a military base where he was questioned and "intimidated". A war was on and the law was very severe about helping young men avoid conscription. It was an extremely damaging, and politically effective, charge to make against him. After eight months he was acquitted. But his enemies forced another trial, in the District of St-Hyacinthe, Bouchard's riding. This time he was charged with 'conspiracy' as well but was acquitted once more.

For two years his name had been smeared in the press yet he emerged with dignity intact and when he was appointed Municipal Librarian in 1930 no one had stood against him. The fact that he had so many letters of reference from eminent men, including those of high office in



Félix Desrochers in his office in the Parliamentary Library

the church also showed, he felt, that he had been unjustly charged.

Félix Desrochers had not just proved his loyalty to the party, he had suffered for it and came out a stronger man. A last flurry of letters was sent in January and February on his behalf and one last long plaintive letter was sent to the Prime Minister on February 8th, 1933. He was beside himself at the apparently new concern by Bennett that someone in such position as General Librarian of the Library of Parliament demonstrate some 'literary qualifications' before they were appointed. After all Félix Desrochers had been through, over a year of fighting off rivals and slander and eight months of unemployment, he was plainly angry with the Prime Minister. Bennett's response, on February 14th 1933 was the following:

Dear Mr. Desrochers,

I have received your letter and as you have been notified of your appointment I do not suppose there is any necessity for my writing further in the matter.

Yours faithfully,

RB Bennett.

The campaign had not just been aggressive and difficult. It highlighted one of the peculiar aspects of the dual nature of the library. The only candidates considered for this position were Francophones with friends who had connections to the Conservative party. English Canadian politicians for the most part kept out of the fray. It was an odd method to use to find the best candidate to fill such a position but it was by no means unusual for the times.

Desrochers as General Librarian

In these days of political correctness let us not belittle Félix Desrochers for the patently political way he went

about obtaining his position. Nevertheless one can legitimately ask the question, "What was so interesting about Félix Desrochers, Librarian?"

Like many Librarians before him he published almost nothing. A bibliographic search will yield all of two titles, one of them a report to the Joint Committee on the Parliamentary Library. The other was a short article on the need for a National Library in Canada.

But while his public record is so slight he did something rather amazing. He left all of his papers with the Library of Parliament rather than taking them home or throwing them out. In the Library of Parliament archives there are very few records left by previous Parliamentary librarians, or library staff, but there is this vast collection left by M. Desrochers.

The fact that he left his files with the library should justify him being remembered as a hero to librarians everywhere. He can give us something we need, a history.

Much of his work, as he states in his notes, was taken up in straightening out the infrastructure of the Library of Parliament. He oversaw the cataloguing project that finally made it possible to locate a book in the 600,000-volume collection that had been placed haphazardly about the old building. He got a new heating and lighting system put into place and upgraded the fire safety standards. It may be said, and I believe that he would agree, that because of his work there was still a collection available to be portioned off for the new National Library after the fire of 1952.

Let us look into some of his files. He kept carbon copies of almost all of his correspondence, which gives us an excellent insight into his work and the life of a General Librarian for the three decades. He also kept the mundane: his income tax files, personnel records, mortgage, records of obituaries and marriages of various people. There are files of genealogy, families, relatives, some well known, some not. But there are other files: *Calixa Lavallée; Bibliothèque nationale cttee; Luttes de l'église pour la Justice social; Dollard des Ormeaux; Franco Américains; Le Blasphème; Attitude du Chrétien devant la presse-cinéma-radio; Jeanne d'arc; etc* An official uniform of a deputy minister, worn by his predecessor M. Taché, complete with sword and a receipt for the \$40 that Félix Desrochers paid for it was also discovered amongst his files. Yet he left no message, that I can discover, asking the Library to do anything with these memories. His trust was implicit. We would take care of his effects.

I have only begun to dig into the boxes that he left behind and though I have found many files of utterly useless material there are also works that he was too modest to publish but not modest enough to destroy.

He wrote a manuscript on the life of Calixa Lavallée, composer of *O Canada*. From his time as a lecturer at the University of Ottawa, he left a manuscript of over 300 pages on the *History of the Book*. There are papers that discuss the Library of Parliament in English and French, undated and unpublished. None of it is annotated and much of it appears to have sprung from his head, written directly onto his typewriter and then altered by pencil afterwards. He was not just well educated but a man of great learning and wide interests, though as an academic he tended to sloppiness. No bibliographies indicate how he came up with so much information on a given subject. But the writing is clear and his facts appear to have been researched. For example, from his lectures to library students, we find him discussing every aspect of the organization and maintenance of libraries.

On what it was to be a librarian in his day:

It is not many years since the popular mind pictured the librarian as an elderly man of severe and scholarly aspect with scanty gray hair, bent form and head thrust forward from the habit of peering through his spectacle along rows of books in search of some coveted volume. ...always to have led a studious and ascetic life... To-day thank God, this is not the specimen of a modern librarian...the librarian must be a scholar and a gentleman: more than that, he must be a good business man.

On keeping a clean library:

The best conditions of cleaning should prevail in toilet facilities, including approaches to toilet, urinals, bowls. Throwing matches or paper in urinals should be prohibited as well as throwing paper on the floors. Clogging or overflowing of the toilet bowls should be attended to immediately....Drinking water should be safe and hygienic. Individual paper cups should be supplied or bubble fountains secured. In public buildings, to drink out of a glass used in common is far from being sanitary.

Along with Collection development he discussed buying insurance for libraries, fire prevention, good lighting and creating a decent ambience in a library. In one section on how to hire janitors, he included the admonition: "One element of health is general cheerfulness" and noted that the janitor himself should be an example of cheerfulness and cleanliness on his own person.

A satisfactory caretaker, generally speaking, is a *rara avis*. It is difficult to find one who does not develop some radical defect, fondness for beer, laziness, or something worse-within twelve months of his appointment.

On the health of Librarians:

It is important to recognise that the library makes heavy demands upon the vitality of its workers; the rapid adjustment to varied clientele seeking information over a wide range of questions, the confusion, frequent bad air and lighting, hurried and irregular lunches and suppers all take their toll in vital forces...librarians are victims of their own zeal...perhaps we are also prone to recruit into librarianship persons of sensitive nervous systems...it is not a happy thing to watch young people losing vigour and spontaneous enthusiasm while engaged in a service that requires just those qualities for effective relations with the public and which should bring such happiness...It may be that the present standard of forty to forty-four hours a week are excessive.

A man ahead of his time he recommended the appointment of a Social Director to provide stimulating activities to the staff and he also recommended long vacations to all staff.

We find songs, and prayers and essays, speeches, tributes, lecture notes, he must have spent every waking moment writing when he was not working.

His files on French Canadian Nationalism, on Catholicism, on fighting against Blasphemy are enough for another article. He was front and centre in the battle waged in Quebec against the loosening of the church's hold on culture and against the onslaught of English and American culture. Lionel Groulx was involved in the exact same battles, in the same organisations, even on the same radio waves. But the differences were great. Lionel Groulx had a clear political agenda and a great need to influence young people, to create a following that would retain the distinctive aspect of an old style French Canadian Catholic society. Groulx spoke of a metaphorical *Laurentia*, a separate country of the true French Canadian and he made sure that everything he wrote or said was published somewhere. Félix, on the other hand, was a political fighter who fought his battles in the trenches, tirelessly writing letters, making speeches and travelling throughout Quebec and the US to sit at the tables of those who would preserve French Canadian culture, language and the Catholicism that he loved. He was what we now call a Quebec federalist but he would have found that to be a curious term.

He did not expect to be followed, he did not expect to be published. But by leaving all of his files to the Library, he did expect to be remembered.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated all references refer to documents in the *Desrochers Papers* held by the Library of Parliament.