

Beneath the Surface in Montreal

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Two great nations of different language, race and religion, each holding tenaciously to its national customs, divide Montréal into two parts. The French-Canadian Catholics, guaranteed by treaty perpetual preservation of their language and religion, are still in the majority. (1)

English citizens, drawing upon the resources of the entire Dominion, of which Montreal is the chief port, possess most of the wealth and the power that goes with it. The conflicts arising from this division have demanded and established two official languages.

Montreal lays claim to being the wealthiest city "per capita" in America. Though relatively small in comparison with the ports of the United States, it has behind it the entire Dominion of Canada. Some of its wealth has gone to build up vast private institutions—private schools from McGill College downward, private hospitals and institutions for the care of dependent children. The French, not so wealthy today as they were once, own large tracts of land and many buildings which, steeped in the memories of two centuries ago, stand free from taxation because they are church property. Wherever one goes about the city, these enormous grey-walled structures are seen—some of them, like the Grey Nunnery, housing 1,000 people and caring for foundlings and old men within the same enclosure.

In spite of these evidences of wealth, the social work done by the city government is appallingly small. With tax receipts cut away down by the large amount of exempt property, progress in this direction has been difficult. (2)

Thus we find that Montreal has the largest infant mortality rate in North America, and that its density of population per park space is greater than any large city on the continent—greater even than that of crowded New York. We find that Montreal has no free library supported by taxation, and that while there are thirty-five school boards within the city limits, there is no compulsory education and no school census.

To the reader of American newspapers, who learns of fresh methods to combat infant mortality as he learns of new inventions in flying, it is surprising to discover that in a city where summer holds few of the terrors which he knows, there is still an infant death rate of 250 per thousand. The statistician of the city hall declared that although his figures are not scientifically accurate, due to the lack of compulsory birth registration, the mortality in Montreal is by far the greatest among the French Canadians. Large families living in overcrowded districts on low salaries contribute greatly to this result.

With the exception of two screens from the Department of Contagious Diseases and one on medical inspection, visitors from out of town noticed the total absence of exhibits by the Board of Health. This Department of Montreal's government has little to do with child welfare. Even medical inspection has been just recently undertaken.

The crux of the housing problems in Montreal is her rear courts. Buildings stand sometimes three deep on

a lot and in many cases a narrow covered archway is the only entrance through which 200 or more people can reach their homes.

The absence of any exhibit from a park department was another lack noticed by the visitor. The only playgrounds in the city are run by private associations, with the exception of three school grounds which were unlocked this last summer by order of the Catholic School Board.

Throughout several months an attempt was made to obtain a complete list of schools. No such list could be made up. There is, as far as we know, no complete list of even the public schools in Montreal. There is one Protestant School Board for the city, one for the town of Westmount, which is entirely surrounded by the city of Montreal, and there is a Catholic board of commissioners for most parishes. All of these are supported by taxation, but the text books in one differ from those in another and in many the pupils pay tuition. Since each parish contributes to the support of its own schools, the poorest parish with the largest number of children has the least money for school purposes. The educational system in Montreal is in a condition of chaos.

It would be grossly unfair to say that no one in Montreal knows that such conditions as these exist. Attempts at remedying them are being made. Yet in these very attempts lurks a familiar danger. Montreal seems not to know that she is threatening to turn herself into that Frankenstein of mismanaged charity, an "institutionalized" city. It is the demand for more institutions which is heard rather than for the thoroughgoing prevention of child dependence. So it was that in the exhibition sections on philanthropy, law and industry, a strong stand was made for the integrity of the home against the easy and insidious encroachment of the institution. The extension of careful case work in order to stop the breaking up of the family and the building up of a more accurate, substantial body of facts in regard to the actual conditions surrounding home life were urged. Those in charge of the exhibit experienced the greatest difficulty in getting trustworthy statistics on which to make definite statements.

Now and then, during the last few years, there have been murmurings that child labor exists in Montreal. How much or little no one really knows. An investigation by a French Canadian working girl among several hundred employes brought out, under signed statements, the startling fact that one-third began work before the age of fourteen. Montreal has no compulsory education and no accurate birth registration—two instruments necessary to the enforcement of a child labor by-law.

The co-operation of the Catholics in this critical stock-taking of their city's social assets stands out as one of the notable achievements among child welfare exhibitions over the continent. Fully one-half of the institutions represented were Catholic and the same percentage was found among the children who took part in the demonstration. The Catholic section dealing with moral and religious training of the child showed in a comprehensive way the various activities of the church which keep the children bound to its teachings from the cradle to the grave. Perhaps the most comprehensive bit of research done in the entire exhibit was that carried through by three French Catholic associations of young women, representing the employees of department stores, offices and factories. Catholic sisters were everywhere in the hall, guiding the children in drills, gymnastics and singing. What this may mean in co-operation between two peoples and two religions can not easily be measured.

1. (It is stated that French-Canadians are not now in a majority.—Ed.)

2. (And by interest on street widening &c.—Ed.)