

THE SENATE

Wednesday, March 18, 1992

The Senate met at 2 p.m., the Hon. the Speaker *pro tempore* in the Chair.

Prayers.

SENATORS' STATEMENTS

[Translation]

THE LATE ROGER LEMELIN

TRIBUTES

Hon. Arthur Tremblay: Honourable senators, everyone, his friends, his family, the people in the Saint-Sauveur district in the "Town Below" in Quebec City, we all knew that Roger was terminally ill, when two days ago he died of cancer, a matter of months after the brutal diagnosis he was given last summer. Still, we knew him as a stubborn fighter who would never give up, and we could not help hoping, despite medical evidence to the contrary, that the disease would go into remission, that it would stay that way for a long time, and that he would have time to write the book that was already complete in his head, as he said in that wonderful and moving interview with Réginald Martel which appeared in *La Presse* about two or three weeks ago. He wanted to write this book to do something for other cancer patients, to help them rise above their condition, which he shared and overcome that feeling of despondency and despair they had upon arriving at Hôtel-Dieu Hospital, a feeling he had been spared, as he said in his interview with Mr. Martel.

It was not to be.

Today, we mourn a great Quebecer and a great Canadian, whom Gaston Miron called one the founders of the modern Quebec novel, which he was and will remain in the history of our literature. Two names always come to mind: Roger Lemelin and Gabrielle Roy. *The Town Below*, Roger's first book, was published in 1944; the second, *The Plouffe Family*, appeared in 1948. In between, in 1945, *The Tin Flute* appeared, by Gabrielle Roy, a Franco-Manitoban. These three novels marked the beginning of the modern era described by Miron. The setting had shifted from the rural world of *Maria Chapdelaine*, by Louis Hémon, of *Thirty Acres* by Ringue and *Menaud, maître draveur*, by Félix-Antoine Savard, to the urban environment, thus reflecting the migration from rural Quebec to the cities after the First World War.

Neither author focused on the well-to-do urban Quebecer. In the case of Lemelin, the setting was a working-class neighbourhood in Quebec City, while Gabrielle Roy chose Saint-Henri. All three novels have something else in common which is particularly revealing: the family is the focus of the story,

and the role of the mother is significant, which reminds us of the lively description our former colleague, Senator Le Moynes, gave of the French Canadian mother in one of his essays published under the title *Convergence*.

The novels Roger Lemelin wrote in the 40s were best sellers and they reached a relatively broad readership. However, this was nothing compared to the audience *The Plouffe Family* would have on television, not only in Quebec but across Canada. As Odile Tremblay reported in yesterday's *Le Devoir*:

The series, which was also broadcast on the English network, had a combined rating of an incredible 4.4 million viewers, a record at the time.

To quote Gaston Miron:

With *The Plouffe Family*, Roger Lemelin for the first time gave Quebecers an image with which they could identify, an image they learned to love.

I think one could hardly improve on this metaphor for the significance of Lemelin's work and the man himself to the community that gave him his roots and whose deepest values he expressed so admirably.

Honourable senators, in the summer of 1988, in a situation similar to today's, I had to pay tribute to another very close friend, Jean Marchand, who also had just died. Jean and Roger became friends when we were in our early twenties. I was fortunate to share the same friendship with them both. Their friendship for me never failed, despite the difference in personalities. I believe that we all shared the same friendship for each other. You will therefore understand why I conclude in the same terms for Roger as I did for Jean. Everything that was said on the radio and on television and everything that has been written in the newspapers in the last two days shows, it seems to me, that Roger Lemelin made a mark on his time as very few other Quebecers and Canadians did. The tribute that we pay to his memory and that is paid to him from all quarters is one befitting a great man. He was indeed a great man.

May his soul rest in peace in the hope of the resurrection. To his wife Valéda, to his children and the other members of his family, on behalf of my wife Pauline and myself, I offer the most heartfelt and warmest condolences.

Hon. Maurice Riel: Honourable senators, I want to join Senator Tremblay in paying tribute to the memory of Roger Lemelin.

Roger Lemelin was typically Québécois, quite French and deeply Canadian. He was also a writer of quality, a smart businessman and a dynamic individual. He was unique. He was part of Quebec life for at least two generations.