

Progressive political ideas deserve attention

Dr. Frank Guttman is the unlikely biographer of a Quebec politician named Bouchard.

No, not the one you think.

Télesphore-Damien Bouchard was elected to what was then the Legislative Assembly in 1912. His political CV includes stints as mayor of St. Hyacinthe for 25 years, leader of the Liberal opposition in the Assembly, Speaker of the legislature and a provincial cabinet minister from 1939 to 1944, when he was appointed to the Senate.

So why should we care about this other Bouchard, an obscure politician who has been dead and largely forgotten since 1962?

At the Atwater Library today, Guttman will talk about why Bouchard matters. His book is called *The Devil from Saint-Hyacinthe*, and the subtitle describes Bouchard as a “tragic hero.”

Simply put, Bouchard was ahead of his time. His progressive ideas – and the support Bouchard garnered among the good citizens of St. Hyacinthe – belie the notion that pre-1960 Quebec was a priest-ridden backwater, ruled by the upturned palms and iron fists of corrupt politicians and reactionary clerics.

To paraphrase Bob Dylan, something was happening here – and too many of us don’t know what it was. Decades before Jean Lesage came to power to launch the Quiet Revolution, Bouchard was an outspoken champion of public education, nationalized hydroelectricity, workers’ rights legislation and women’s suffrage.



MIKE BOONE

on an early Quebec rebel

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That’s what Bouchard was for. What he opposed, fundamentally, was the Roman Catholic Church’s malevolent influence on the public affairs of Quebec.

Given the current popular embrace of these ideals – secularism is the new religion of Quebec – it is surprising that T-D Bouchard remained a figure largely lost to history until a Jewish anglophone traded his scalpel for a keyboard.

Frank Guttman turned 80 yesterday. Until his retirement from medicine in 2003, Guttman taught at McGill and was chief of pediatric surgery at the Montreal Children’s Hospital.

Rather than devote his sunset years to golf, Guttman went back to school for a master’s degree in Quebec history. He is following up *The Devil from Saint-Hyacinthe* with a

biography of Honoré Beaugrand, the journalist-author-folklorist/ politician whose name graces our easternmost métro station.

Guttman is a soft-spoken man of small-l liberal convictions who has been active in the Canadian branch of the Peace Now movement in Israel.

Raised in the rarefied air of upper Outremont – his father owned the Progress Brand clothing firm – Guttman did an undergraduate honours degree in physiology at McGill University but was not admitted to the university’s medical school.

The rejection still rankles. During our conversation at his apartment near the Montreal General Hospital, Guttman, who got his M.D. in Geneva “when the Canadian dollar was worth 4.3 Swiss francs,” was pleased to note “I didn’t contribute to the (McGill) alumni fund until I became a full professor.”

Returning to Montreal in the 1950s, Guttman did general surgery at the Jewish General Hospital and put in 17 years at Hôpital Ste. Justine, where he perfected the spoken French he’d learned at Strathcona Academy (“They had great teachers who drilled us with grammar”) and in Switzerland.

Having grown up “in a Jewish village within Outremont,” Guttman knew few Quebecers until he worked at Ste. Justine.

The friendships he formed at the French hospital piqued Guttman’s interest in the myth that until the Quiet Revolution, Quebec was populated entirely by narrow-minded

xenophobes.

Guttman’s uncle was a travelling salesman for Progress Brand. On visits to St. Hyacinthe, he got to know the town’s mayor.

“Bouchard was a Judophile,” Guttman says. “On Dec. 25, 1905, he wrote a column in response to a right-wing pundit who had attacked Jewish immigration to Quebec.

“Bouchard wrote ‘Jews are just like us: some are good, some are bad. But one thing is good: they value education, they work hard and if some are rich, it’s because they save their pennies and don’t go to the tavern on Friday afternoon.’

“He was a tough guy.”

As leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Assembly, Bouchard traded barbs with Premier Maurice Duplessis, who enjoyed thrust-and-parry with the Liberal.

When Duplessis accused him of insufficient piety, Bouchard responded “When I go to Church, I don’t come out and cross the street to visit another man’s wife.”

“Duplessis liked him and right-wing historians have liked him,” Guttman says.

“They admired Bouchard’s verve and audacity.”

Provincial politics could use a little of both.

Frank Guttman will speak about *The Devil from Saint-Hyacinthe* at the Atwater Library, today at 12:30. Free admission.

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