

LOOKING BACK

SEND US YOUR SUGGESTIONS: 514 987 2485 | history@montrealgazette.com

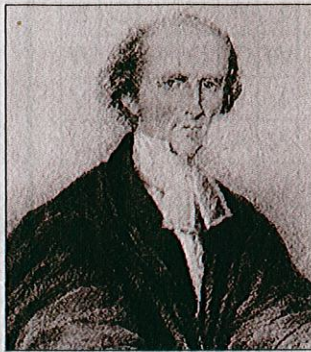
Scottish immigrant was a force in English-language education

SUSAN MCGUIRE

When Henry Esson arrived in Montreal in 1817 from northern Scotland, there were only two English-language schools in the city, and both were small, private institutions. There was no school to train the young working-class immigrants arriving from the British Isles after the wars of 1812 to 1815.

Esson was just 24, a Presbyterian clergyman with a master of arts degree who had been assigned to St. Gabriel's Street Church, one of the most important Protestant churches in Montreal. During the next 27 years, he would influence the development of Montreal's English-language education system.

Five years after his arrival, Esson set up the Montreal Academical Institution, a private school that operated for 10 years. Among the pupils were Henry Starnes,



PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA ARCHIVES
Henry Esson was the founder and guiding light of the first organization in Montreal to offer adult education.

who became mayor of Montreal in the 1850s, and Aaron Phillip Hart, who became a prominent lawyer. Attending for a time in 1828 was Amedée Papineau, son of Louis-Joseph Papineau, who noted in his Souvenir de Jeunesse 1822-1827 that it was at the Esson school that he took his first lessons in

French – studying Fénelon's *Télémaque*.

Esson was not afraid of controversy. If the Presbyterians were going to work toward the development of Lower Canada, they would need money for churches and ministers. He was among those who lobbied successfully for government recognition of the Presbyterian Church as one of the established churches in Canada. As a result, in 1824 the Presbyterians gained a share of the lands known as Clergy Reserves, which had been set up in 1791 for the support of Anglican clergy.

He made strenuous efforts to prevent the continuation of McGill College as an exclusively Anglican preserve, and he championed the rights of the Church of Scotland to share in directing schools in Lower Canada and in furnishing them with teachers. Rev. J.S.S. Armour, currently minister emeritus at

the Presbyterian Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul in downtown Montreal, comments: "Without Esson, there might have been no William Dawson at McGill University, nor the very successful High School of Montreal. The fact that both institutions were decidedly Scottish in outlook might be to Esson's credit."

In November 1828, Esson was the founder and guiding light of the first organization in Montreal to offer adult education: the Montreal Mechanics' Institution, which continues today as the Atwater Library and Computer Centre.

He perceived that the apprenticeship system for young men was breaking down in Montreal, and a new industrial era was beginning. He saw the need to equip Canadian-born workers, as well as immigrants, with the education and skills needed for employment in the burgeoning building trades and in the

new factories and industries.

To achieve the needed practical education for adults, he proposed the establishment of the Mechanics' Institution, based on ideas developed in Scotland in the early 1800s. The institution would be an association of "mechanics" (a term applied loosely to employers in the building and other trades) that would establish a library and reading room; a minerals and natural-history museum; a school for apprentices to learn arithmetic, algebra and geometry; and lectures on practical mechanics, chemistry, history and the arts. Leading citizens would provide some funding and help, but the running of the organization would be in the hands of "mechanics."

Esson, an intellectual above all, was a founder in 1827 of the Natural History Society of Montreal, which sponsored lectures and investigations on

a wide variety of subjects. He was the first chaplain of the St. Andrew's Society, and in 1836 was on the management committee of the École Normale de Montréal, a teacher-training school open to both Catholics and Protestants.

The struggles among factions within the Presbyterian community in Montreal led in 1844 to Esson's departure for Toronto, where he taught at what later became Knox College at the University of Toronto.

Esson married Maria Sweeney, from a prominent Montreal family. Both their children died in infancy, and Maria died in 1826. Before moving to Toronto, he married Elizabeth Campbell. He died in 1853 at age 60, and is buried in Mount Royal Cemetery, alongside his first wife and children.

Susan McGuire is historian at the Atwater Library.