
Bicentennial of the Quebec National Assembly Library

by Gaston Bernier

Legislators regularly celebrate anniversaries of various types, such as the creation of legislative institutions, the establishment of the press gallery or of Hansard or the passage of the Act giving women the right to vote. This year, Quebec Members and administrators are being invited to commemorate the founding of the National Assembly Library.

The establishment two hundred years ago of a library for elected and appointed parliamentarians is an event that warrants a historical review of the Library's staff, services, collections, techniques, financial resources and influence. Once the essential elements of the past decades have been established we will concentrate on presenting summarily the main activities that have already taken place and those yet to come.

The Bicentennial in Perspective

The origin of the Library of the National Assembly dates back to the very beginning of the 19th century. Its distant ancestor was created ten years after the first parliamentary institutions were founded on the shores of the St. Lawrence. More precisely, the Members established their first library on March 10, 1802. On that day, they appointed the members of a committee responsible for managing the books that had been received a few months earlier and for drafting the first rules respecting their use.

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BIBLIOTHÈQUE
1802-2002
ASSEMBLÉE NATIONALE

Between 1792 and 1802, the Members and public servants of the Assembly had undoubtedly used the library of Quebec, a private library created by Governor Haldimand and situated in the same building as the Parliament. Since that time, the Library has experienced three fires (1849, 1854 and 1883), several relocations and an important partition in 1867. It has been in its current location since 1915, but, since the 1970s, a number of employees have occupied offices in peripheral buildings.

For over one hundred and twenty-five years, the Library was little more than a book depository. The services available were undifferentiated, and there was felt to be no real need for an organization chart. During this period, the librarian – and there have been some excellent ones – constituted the essential part of the Library and its services. At the end of the 1930s, the authorities established an information service, the forerunner of what is known today as the users' or reference service. The increase in the number of services and their specialization came about in the 1970s, with the exception of the opening of a bindery. During this decade, three divisions were created: an analysis or research service (which was detached from the Library in December 2000), a group dedicated to reconstituting the legislative debates that had been held between 1867 and 1962 and a section responsible for preparing and distributing topical files. Finally, the Hansard indexing programme and, more re-

cently, the management of the Assembly's administrative documents and in-house archives were attached to the Library. In the space of nearly two hundred years, the Library has gone from being an entity with ill-defined duties to an enterprise that furnishes specialized services and consists of distinct units having clear terms of reference.

The evolution of the rudimentary 19th-century library into the institution we know today has had a great influence on the number and the types of its employees. Before 1833, the Clerk was responsible for the collection of volumes placed at the disposal of parliamentarians. In 1833 and for the next few years Étienne Parent, the first titular librarian, took on this task. Beginning in 1867, poet and writer Pamphile Le May, librarian for 25 years, was assisted by two colleagues.

At the beginning of the century (1903-1904), there were six employees (the director, his assistant, three clerks and a messenger), and fifty years later (1955-1956), there were some twenty permanent employees.

Today, documentary services in the broadest sense of the term – identifying, acquiring, processing, storing and disseminating information, sometimes in the form of studies – employ 65 persons (to whom should be added trainees). One can thus easily understand that the services available have become rather specialized, a notion that was unthinkable in 1867, given the limited number of public servants then working at the Library and, also, at the Assembly in general.

The differentiation of services was inevitably followed by specialization on the part of the staff. Initially, it should be noted, those assigned to the Library were humanists and generalists, lovers of books and culture. Their contribution was nonetheless decisive. They assembled a core collection that to this day is the pride of the institution. Then came the library technicians and professionals (the first graduate in library science was recruited during the Quiet Revolution, the first technicians at the turn of the 1970s) and, more recently, in 1972, research officers specialized in political science, history, law, economics and geography.

The collections purchased or donated and conserved at the Library have also been streamlined, as it were. While pride of place was initially given to volumes concerning law and legislation (24% of the collection in 1841, according to data provided by Gilles Gallichan¹, government publications and newspapers, a large peripheral

domain was occupied by literary works, genealogical indices and scientific or philosophical textbooks. In part, however, a shortage of space made it necessary to winnow the documentation. Furthermore, the needs of Members and of the population were changing. The means of communication and information multiplied; at the same time, the demand for statistical data grew increasingly to the detriment of works of philosophical reflection. Currently, the Assembly's documentary collection essentially satisfies the needs of the nation's representatives: It is an encyclopedic collection if we take into consideration the reference works and those on the open shelves; it is above all a social sciences collection (law, political science, economics, history, etc.) if we extend our perspective to include research papers and specialized journals, government publications in the broad sense and newspapers.

Throughout its history, the Library has relied on the tools and techniques in general use. The authorities of the Assembly, both political and administrative, have seen various types of catalogs (the first of these published in volume format beginning in 1811; the files, as such, established beginning in 1935; microfiches and now remotely accessible computerized files), various filing charge-out systems, the arrival of the telephone and facsimile telegraphy, photocopying machines, microfilms or microfiches and the required viewers and printers, computers and telematics.

The organization has evolved with the times. It has integrated the new techniques, which in turn have influenced its operations, brought down barriers and liberated it from the documentary autarchy that had been almost inevitable until then. Nowadays, the wealth of the Library's resources depends not only on the documentation it holds on the premises but also on that which can be consulted and used via the electronic library, which encompasses all of the documentation centres made accessible thanks to modern technology. A first concentric circle of this library without walls is exemplified by the computerized collective catalogue. It can be consulted by users at the National Assembly and which contains entries on the books, pamphlets, microfilms, microfiches, CD-ROMS and video cassettes kept within the Network of Quebec Government Libraries.

In retrospect, we can see that the documentation service placed at the disposal of the Members, their assistants and the parliamentary public servants has always been able to rely on adequate financial resources. Notwithstanding the remonstrances and paroxysms of its conservators (Le May at the end of the 19th century; Marquis in 1935), the Library has received a reasonable share of the appropriations granted to Parliament and, on certain occasions, additional sums (\$8,000 for the purchase

of the Chauveau collection in 1892; \$3,000 for that of Judge Antoine Polette four years earlier, etc.). Year after year, the sums set aside for the Library in relation to the budget of the Assembly (excluding the Legislative Council) have hovered in the vicinity of 4%: close to 2.5% in 1877-78; 6.7% in 1892-93; 4% in 1918-19; 6.4% in 1979-80; 4.7% in 1999-2000, and 3.5 % in 2001-02 (the decrease is due for the most part to the detachment of the analysis or research operation).

The portion granted to documentary services in the broad sense of the term has decreased slightly in relative terms in the last thirty years owing to the appearance of new services within the legislative administration (visitors' services, Hansard, the televising and broadcasting of the debates, interparliamentary relations, research in parliamentary procedure). The real tragedy in all of this is not the relative scarcity of resources but the increasing cost of books and subscriptions, the high price of CD-ROMs and the increasing demand for external data banks. Accordingly, users must rely more and more with every passing day on external documentary resources: those of the administrative libraries, of the Bibliothèque nationale and of the university libraries.

It is to the credit of successive Speakers and of the higher-level administrators of the Assembly that the Library's influence has increased since the appointment of Étienne Parent and especially that of Pamphile Le May. But librarians have spared no means to ensure that this influence would be of benefit to the Legislature (as it was referred to at the time) and, now, the National Assembly. The eight library directors from 1867 to 2000 and their assistants have left their mark in the fields of literature (Le May), history and bibliography (Dionne, Myrand, Marquis, Doughty and Beaulieu) and law and documentation (Desjardins, Bonenfant, Prémont and Gérin-Lajoie). For close to a quarter of a century, the Library has published a large number of reference works (biographical inventories or dictionaries, compendia of election statistics, Hansard indices, summaries of Assembly proceedings prior to 1963, bibliographies, etc.), which, besides facilitating the work of parliamentary personnel, are used intensively by researchers and, often, by citizens. In this area the personnel of the Library contributes to the influence of the institution and to the dissemination of knowledge on the parliamentary system and on certain aspects of political life.

A Preview of the Second Centenary

The Library of the National Assembly is celebrating its two-hundredth anniversary in 2002. Certain events have taken place; others will take place in the coming months.

The following is a brief inventory of these activities, their desired objectives and their organization.

The commemoration programme will unfold primarily from March to October. The actual anniversary will be observed by means of activities of a formal nature. The opening ceremony took place on March 14. It was marked by unveiling a mosaic of the former library directors as well as two commemorative plaques offered to the Commission de la Capitale nationale: one to recall the establishment of the Library and the other to identify the home of the first person to take this institution into his charge, Clerk Samuel Phillips.

With regard to professional activities, among other things, the biennial meeting of the Association of Parliamentary Librarians in Canada (APLIC or ABPAC) will be held in September 2002. This meeting will be followed by a seminar on the history of parliamentary libraries in Quebec, Canada, Europe and New England. We also plan to organize three lunchtime conferences. The speakers will be a foreign parliamentary librarian; political figures, either currently in office or retired; and a historian. Since this March, an exhibition has been in progress concerning both those who have assumed responsibility for the Library and the contribution of those to whom they have been answerable, the Speakers of the Assembly.

The programme will continue throughout the anniversary year and no doubt into 2003. We plan to publish a volume on the history of the Library; an essay on the collection assembled between 1802 and 1849, the year of the first fire; a special issue of *Documentation et bibliothèques* devoted to parliamentary libraries, their history, their management, their operations, their collections, their readership and their future; an issue of the *Bulletin de la Bibliothèque* (published in March 2002); a testimonial composed of observations by contemporary and former readers; and, finally, a compendium of texts written by history students under the supervision of Gilles Gallichan.

The final aspect of the celebration encompasses social and promotional activities. A poster has been created showing the stained-glass window by Guido Nincheri that adorns the Library and depicts the perpetuity of science. "Open houses" are planned in June for parliamentarians and their assistants, for the families of employees and even for retirees and the administrative personnel in general.

Other undertakings are envisaged, including the publication of a dictionary on parliamentary institutions, the coining of a commemorative medal, a special issue of a historical press digest, the regrouping of all of the Library services under one address and the creation of a puzzle reproducing Nincheri's stained-glass window.

The projects planned for this anniversary aim to underscore the vision and the spirit of openness of the Speakers and political leaders of both the 19th and 20th centuries; to intensify relationships with current and future parliamentarians and their assistants; to strengthen contacts with the public servants of the administrative secretariat; to pay homage to current documentary services personnel and their predecessors; and, finally, to emphasize links with library colleagues and other libraries within the formal or semi-official documentation networks.

Conclusion

The activities planned for the second centenary will above all bear the hallmark of the National Assembly itself. The undertakings proposed should, as a whole, leave a lasting impression and serve, if not as a springboard, at least as a step up for those yet to come. Moreover, they should signal the recent entry into the 21st

century and provide an orientation to guide the future evolution of documentary services for the nation's representatives, who view such an evolution as a pressing necessity.

The library, at the service of a specialized readership for close to two hundred years, has evolved at the pace of both the parent institution and the prevailing techniques and methods. It has benefitted from the generosity of the state yet remained in solidarity with it: The Library is, within the National Assembly, a service that involves itself in the core and substance of events, one that embodies the very memory of our institution and yet accepts the daily task of documentary research. This reality must endure and adapt to a changing context. It thus seems important to mark its two-hundredth anniversary.

Notes

1. *Livre et politique au Bas-Canada, 1741-1849*, Quebec: Septentrion, 1991, p. 374)