

Getting Started: Personal Recollections of JACFA's Formative Years, 1972-75

By Bob Hill, Montreal, Jan 2007

Bob Hill taught history at John Abbott from 1973 until his retirement in 1997. He was known as "Hammer" Hill for his great skill in hammering out solutions to conflicts with the Administration in the College's Labour Relations Committee (CRT).

In April 1972, just a year after John Abbott College had opened its doors, a "Common Front" of public-sector unions in Quebec's three major labour federations walked off the job. Work stoppages erupted in the private sector as well, and by May the province was reeling under the effects of the largest general strike ever held in North America. Media stories about hospital patients in urine-soaked sheets whipped up public outrage against unions. One day a white-haired gentleman began beating me with a rolled-up *Gazette* outside the school I was picketing. When I held up my picket sign to shield myself, he snatched it away and flailed me with it as well. On the front page of his newspaper was a photo of an unfed baby crying untended in its hospital crib. When my assailant finally paused to catch his breath, I showed him the fine print stating that the feeding was only delayed, but I don't think it changed his mind.

The Common Front Strike was broken by the Bourassa government with draconian back-to-work legislation, the jailing of defiant labour leaders, and the imposition of ruinous fines on their unions. There was serious civic unrest in several parts of the province. It seemed like Quebec might go up in flames, but little of this turmoil was evident at the placid old Macdonald campus at Ste. Anne de Bellevue, where John Abbott College was born.

John Abbott College, as luck would have it, sat out the Common Front strike because its faculty association, JACFA, was not accredited as

a union until May 29, 1972, by which time the worst was over. Floating serenely as a bubble through the unrest raging on every hand, it had blossomed like a flower in the wilderness. Idealistic administrators, as yet untroubled by unions or government decrees, dreamed of moulding their own post-secondary paradise on the West Island. Some teachers fretted at not being part of a struggle so important to their livelihood, but many, fresh out of university, seemed as carefree as the students with whom they mingled. Was not their newly conceived college something fresh and different from all that had gone before – a departure from the strife and traditions of the past, a brave new "community," in which everyone – students, teachers, and administrators alike – shared common goals and hobnobbed equally on a first-name basis?

This early *ambiance*, recalled by history teacher Roy Piperburg, of "old buildings, co-ed washrooms, beanbag chairs, smoke-filled rooms of varicoloured smoke, and endless meetings necessary (or so it seemed at the time) to bring anarchy out of chaos," was still intact in December, when the government imposed "the Decree." The Decree was an arbitrary contract, dictated by Order-In-Council after all attempts to negotiate a new collective agreement with teachers had broken down. Even the Decree did not immediately affect John Abbott College. JACFA, although an accredited union, was as yet unaffiliated with any of the labour federations to

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which the Decree applied. But John Abbott's halcyon days were numbered, for soon the fledgling college would have to emerge from its idyllic vacuum and fly in the real world of Quebec education outside.

I began teaching at John Abbott in the academic year 1973-74. One teacher on my departmental hiring committee – Gary Evans, the founding president of JACFA – seemed more interested in my previous union experience than my teaching qualifications. I told the committee that 13 years of high-school teaching had taught me that unions, whether one admired them or not, were good for teachers. My first annual salary in the Montreal school system had been a whopping \$4500; by the time I applied at John Abbott, thanks to the efforts of unions, I was earning nearly \$15,000. Even the much maligned Common Front strike had begun to deliver better pensions and other benefits. I had supported the militant unionism of the new Montreal Teachers' Association (MTA) that was superseding the docile "professionalism" of the venerable Provincial Association of Protestant Teachers (PAPT). I had headed the faculty association at Sir Winston Churchill High School, and had worked as a regional organizer for the MTA during the strike. Perhaps I should have added that I felt I had done my bit, and hoped to lay my union burden down and teach happily ever after in my new job, for I could see that Gary had other ideas.

Early in my first semester, Gary Evans persuaded me to sit on a college-wide committee convened by the Secretary-General, Victoria Shipton, to agree on hiring norms for the divisions. We reached a consensus, but when the Secretary-General subsequently disregarded it in favour of the numbers she had proposed in the first place, I circulated a memo revealing what she and the committee had really agreed to, and charged her with using us and the consultation process as mere window dressing. The norms were readjusted with commendable dispatch, but

the Secretary-General, alas, would never speak to me again. Others seemed more favourably impressed. All hopes of union retirement vanished as I was recruited to begin my second semester as JACFA's secretary under incoming president Sam Minsky.

The most important issue of Sam's presidency was the question of union affiliation – whether or not JACFA should join one of Quebec's major labour federations. Most CEGEP unions, including those of Dawson and Vanier, were already part of the Fédération Nationale des Enseignants Québécois (FNEQ) in the CSN (Confederation of National Trade Unions), a few were with the CEQ (Quebec Teachers' Corporation), and only JACFA was still on its own. Apparently the Decree was not designed with an unaffiliated union in mind, and our union, which had been a spectator in the Common Front strike, now found itself dangling in legal limbo with no contractual safeguards for its members whatever.

The idea of JACFA operating in splendid isolation was appealing to some, but most union insiders realized that, whenever a crunch came, our teachers on their own would be as helpless as babes in the woods. The Decree was no bed of roses, but at least it offered a guaranteed salary scale, acquired rights, and access to important protections like grievance arbitration. JACFA, left to its slender resources, would have found itself financially incapable of mounting a court case, or even of maintaining its own representative at Quebec during negotiations for a new collective agreement. As we explored the pros and cons of union affiliation with our teachers, our administration helped out by agreeing to abide by the terms of the Decree for the time being, even though it was under no legal obligation to do so. Then our new Director-General, Bruce McAusland, let it be known that he was prepared to be even more helpful if JACFA chose not to have anything to do with the CSN at all.

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Sometime in the fall of 1973, someone stuck his head into my office in Laird Hall and said: "Bob, you'd better get downstairs. Bruce McAusland is trying to talk a bunch of teachers out of joining FNEQ." I had not yet spoken with our Director-General, who was indeed telling a large gathering that they would find themselves much better off if they got their union and the government to ratify a local agreement with their own Board of Governors instead of joining FNEQ. He touched on hot issues that troubled many – how Quebec's labour movement had become increasingly political, radical, and separatist, and how minority anglophone concerns would get swamped in a nationalist francophone sea. Our college, he concluded, could best flourish if its teachers and administration were left to develop their "special" relationship, unencumbered by undesirable outside influences.

It was a persuasive appeal that cried out for a response. I crossed swords with the Director-General for the first time, and can still remember most of what I said. "The teachers I know at John Abbott do not want to withdraw from Quebec," I maintained, "they want to be part of it. They don't want to stand on the sidelines while others fight their battles for them; they want to participate fully in the cause of better conditions for all teachers. They don't want a special back-stairs agreement or pampered treatment in an anglophone cocoon; they are not afraid of their brothers and sisters in the French-speaking colleges, and want to stand shoulder to shoulder with them in the mainstream of Quebec's educational life." There was more I could have said, but I cut it short when I sensed from the reaction of the growing crowd in Laird lobby what the outcome was likely to be.

JACFA's special committee on union affiliation, consisting of Jim Leeke, George McKiel, and myself, submitted its report in November 1973. We made a point of giving equal space to the full range of perceived advantages

and disadvantages, but concluded with a strong recommendation in favour of joining FNEQ. By February 1974, our president and union executive felt the teachers were ready to vote. Sam Minsky's motion was passed by JACFA's assembly by a margin of 64 to 3. John Abbott's faculty had opted to work in Quebec, not Camelot, and our Director-General, denied the tame in-house union he was hoping for, would have to deal with a more militant affiliated one instead.

Union affiliation was not the only important achievement of Sam's watch. I participated under his leadership in the inaugural meetings of our college's Labour Relations Committee, and found him a lot better than I was at maintaining cordial relations with the administration. I'm not sure if Sam's congeniality would have held up later on, but it certainly paid off during that early era of good "community" feelings. His White Paper on Faculty Evaluation is a good example. The College was determined to implement a system of teacher evaluation, but teachers were just as determined not to have their classroom performance adjudicated by bureaucrats. The smile never left Sam's face as he talked the College into accepting a teacher friendly process that delegated much of the responsibility to the academic departments. Administrators would soon be wondering if they had been cajoled into accepting a pig in a poke, but there were no complaints from teachers. Sam's White Paper, at the very least, relegated a potential bone of contention to the back burner of college life for a long time.

In the spring of 1974 Sam Minsky stepped down, and I became the third president of JACFA. I have nothing but praise for my predecessors. Gary Evans was instrumental in starting our union from scratch; Sam Minsky got it up and running. My challenge, as it turned out, was to strive to vindicate the purpose for which JACFA had been organized – to defend the rights and interests of John Abbott's teachers – for the year

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of my presidency was marked by the outbreak of the first contract disputes in our college's brief history. Because each dispute was a ground-breaker, capable of setting precedents that could influence how similar problems would be dealt with in the future, it was important to reach settlements that were satisfactory to teachers. And I wanted the administrators to understand, right from the start, that they would be well advised not to trifle with teachers' rights unless they wanted a fight on their hands. The very first of these cases is as good an example as any.

An English teacher – we'll call him Oscar – had not returned from Australia to meet his classes on September 1, and his written request to be released from his contract had been received by the College only three days earlier. The Personnel Director, Gerry Stachrowski, charged Oscar with breach of contract and unprofessional conduct, and withheld the final installment of his previous year's cost-of-living allowance. At first it looked like an open-and-shut case, and it would have been easy to simply say "good riddance" to the alleged culprit and leave him to languish in Australia with a blemish on his record and without his \$168.66. But my Labour Relations sidekick, Jim Leeke, believed the College's response might not have been appropriate, and I was inclined to agree.

As I dug deeper, a somewhat different picture began to emerge. The English chairman, Jim Hill, assured me that he had been twice notified prior to registration that Oscar would not be returning, first by Oscar's colleague, Larry Weller, and then in a letter from Oscar himself. He had informed the College immediately, and disruption had been "minimal." In fact, only one, not all four, of Oscar's sections had been cancelled. Jim Hill also confirmed that he had advised the Personnel Director in writing against taking punitive action in view of possible extenuating circumstances. In October, after reading Oscar's letter to Jim and talking with Larry, I received a letter of my own

from Australia that filled in the remaining blanks in the information I needed.

Oscar, it turned out, had met someone in Australia the year before, and had returned to spend the summer with her. By the time he should have been packing his bags to get back to John Abbott, he was in love and she was seriously ill. He kept putting off his departure, and ultimately could not bring himself to leave. Jim Leeke and I weren't sure how all this would wash legally, but it seemed like a good time to put our new union affiliation to the test. We were favourably impressed. I drove to St. Denis St. to see Lucille Beauchemin at FNEQ, explaining the situation in my best Alberta French. Within 24 hours, a CSN legal advisor was on the phone, telling me in English that there were grounds for charging the College with violation of three clauses of the Decree.

At the Labour Relations meeting of November 19, Jim, the good cop, and I, the bad one, opened up on the three administrators with chapter and verse from the Decree, supported by volleys of new information. They trooped out of the room in some confusion to regroup and check with headquarters. When they returned, the Personnel Director was red above the collar. It was the first time his expertise on the Decree had been challenged, and I knew it had not gone well for him out in the corridor. Jim and I looked at each other in a way that meant "hang tough." The next morning I was able to write to inform Oscar that he would soon be receiving a second official letter from the Personnel Director. This one would advise him that, although breach of contract would remain on his dossier, the "unprofessional conduct" letter would be removed, a cheque for his cost-of-living allowance would be enclosed, the College would apologize for its inappropriate actions, and the Personnel Director would express personal wishes for the speedy recovery of his loved one. Gerry Stachrowski, to his credit, even wished them a Merry Christmas.

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Oscar's case, and the ones that followed, aroused considerable interest around the college. It was getting so that I could hardly leave my office without being buttonholed by teachers anxious to get the lowdown on what was going on. Believing that an informed membership would enhance union solidarity (and to spare myself having to relate each saga over and over again in the hallways), I launched a JACFA newsletter called *Communiqué* to keep teachers abreast of issues percolating at the college. A growing concern at the time was the suspicion, not without reason, that our Director-General might be conducting his own clandestine "highway 20" system of faculty evaluation by offering hitch-hiking students a lift and then eliciting scuttlebutt from them about their teachers. So it seemed in *The Strange Case of the Midnight Contract*.

The teacher in *The Strange Case of the Midnight Contract* was being mysteriously denied permanence even though he had already signed his third consecutive contract. When I asked for cause, the administrators in Labour Relations proved strangely reluctant to divulge any, trotting out instead a legal interpretation as ludicrous as it was creative – that the third contract was not really consecutive because of a one-second interval between the time the previous contract expired and the new one took effect. I consulted with the Director General to give him the opportunity to disown this curious position, but soon concluded that it emanated from him. Of all the preposterous pretences I ever encountered in Labour Relations, this one takes the cake, and my report in *Communiqué* reduced it to such a laughing stock that the wronged teacher was quickly granted *permanence* without another peep. Such episodes did more than dispel labour tensions with occasional interludes of comic relief. They tended to reinforce prevailing suspicions about "highway 20" evaluations, and also put to rest any lingering notions that John Abbott's teachers might have been better off had

we entrusted our well-being to our "benevolent" local administration instead of opting for the tender mercies of the Decree.

Communiqué was never just a newsletter. Because it proved capable of getting results by simply holding incompetent or inappropriate administrative conduct up to the light of day, it was, from the start, an effective weapon in JACFA's dispute-resolution arsenal. Some teachers, enjoying friendly personal relations with "nice guys" (as indeed they were) on the administration, were occasionally taken aback by what they read. "Are they fools or knaves?" economics teacher Charles Reid once asked me. "Both," I replied. "They're fools when they get into these situations, and knaves when they try to cover up." Years later, I learned that Charlie had since found occasion of his own to quote me more than once. I wish I could tell the story of *Communiqué's* finest hour, on the issue of "A Safe and Healthful Environment" during a period of unsanitary renovations and worse, but that didn't happen early enough to be part of these recollections. The modest *Communiqué* of my era has since given way to the handsome *JACFA News* of today, but the tradition it established, of keeping teachers informed and the College on its toes, doesn't seem to have changed a bit.

It would, of course, be misleading to suggest that JACFA's influence was appreciated by everyone. Victoria Shipton's *Pilgrims and Puppets*, John Abbott's "official history," contains a good deal of useful material, but undermines its historical credibility by demonizing unions and their members with a zeal that transcends balanced judgment. One does not have to be fond of unions to recognize that they are an important, even necessary, institution in modern society, and that their rights are enshrined in the laws of every enlightened country. To bewail their very existence is reactionary, and *Pilgrims and Puppets* does plenty of wailing, subjecting the reader to repeated eruptions of misinformation,

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bitter tears, and bile whenever the disagreeable subject comes up.

Did you know that John Abbott College was conceived and founded by a handful of visionary “pilgrims” whose dreams of excellence were frustrated at every turn by the mediocre mass of unionized “puppets” that made up the teaching faculty? Such is the puerile symbolism that pervades this unfortunate misadventure into historical analysis. Those deemed to be pilgrims – usually administrators or members of the Board of Governors – are singled out for recognition and praise. The ignominious puppets are tarred en masse by a vindictive brush and cast out of further consideration into some kind of collective purgatory, their names unmentionable and their contributions ignored, though at one point the author slips in three JACFA surnames in the plural – “the Leekes, the Welches, and the Joneses” – so we will be left in no doubt as to their ilk. Indeed, pluck out all those pernicious puppeteers and their piddling pedagogical pawns, the pathetically paltry puppets, and we are left with a paucity of prescient paragons in these paranoid pages to praise as progressive pilgrims apart from our pouting polemicist and her peerless pals in the administration.

Pilgrims and puppets? Is this the embodiment of that “community” spirit espoused by John Abbott’s pioneers? The book’s insinuation, from its peevish title on down, that John Abbott’s teachers had cravenly abdicated their free will in forming a union is more than just a blatant falsehood. It is an appalling insult to the dedicated men and women who were doing the work of the college that mattered most of all. John Abbott must be the only college in the English-speaking world to publish and disseminate a self-history that denigrates its own teachers.

To anyone familiar with how JACFA has always functioned, *Pilgrims and Puppets* betrays an embittered mentality and a comprehension of teachers’ unions so distorted from reality as to

border on hallucination. The independent men and women I remember at John Abbott were nobody’s puppets, and I don’t recall them being particularly deferential to their union leaders either. People like Gary Evans, Sam Minsky, and I were not bosses, and we would have soon been given the raspberry had we ever tried to be. We were ordinary working teachers elected to positions of responsibility by our peers, and we remained answerable to them. We were neither mindless puppets before this democratic process nor scheming puppeteers after it. We took no orders from any higher power, and decided by majority vote in open assembly with our own members whether to participate in joint action with other unions or not. Mostly we represented our fellow teachers, sometimes we tried to persuade them, but we had no way of dominating, intimidating, or coercing them even if we’d wanted to. The Machiavellian power *Pilgrims and Puppets* attributes to us might have come in handy if we’d actually had some, but the Decree had not stacked the deck in our favour. Perhaps opponents found it politic to misconstrue our influence as power-based in order to provide themselves with a plausible scapegoat for their own failures – an unintended compliment of sorts, because it suggests that the little we ever had going for us – the sincerity of our convictions, the force of our arguments, and the ability to communicate democratically with those whose interests we served – was usually enough.

As a former teacher, I give *Pilgrims and Puppets* an “F” for its flawed methodology, biased reporting, unproven assumptions, undocumented generalizations, suppression of contrary evidence, one-sided smear tactics, and other shortcomings not always found even in student essays. As a former union leader, I invite anyone who thinks an entire faculty, or even a roomful, of real-life John Abbott teachers can be manipulated like marionettes to try it sometime. And as an historian, I can attest that this petulant

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outpouring, despite all the work that clearly went into it, disqualifies itself as real history. That a disgruntled former administrator would not like unions is hardly surprising, but historians, even would-be historians, are supposed to at least attempt to rise above unbridled subjectivity in reconstructing the past.

Pilgrims and Puppets, as its title implies, is primarily an opinion piece. Its opinions are unsubstantiated, and (in my own humble estimation) generally range from wrongheaded to just plain wrong. Its historical content, much of it nostalgic trivia, is highly selective, censored, and tailored to suit the predilections of the author. At worst it's a hatchet job on puppets; at best it's only special pleading on behalf of pilgrims, and a poor specimen at that. I did not deem it worthy of comment when it first appeared, and if I mention it now, it is only because I am surprised to learn that unsold copies, instead of being buried in the vault, are still handed out to newly-hired administrators. One wonders if those who continue to associate the good name of John Abbott College with this dubious diatribe are not embarrassed if they have ever taken the trouble to actually read it, let alone reflect on its mean-spirited theme. For it would take more than petty innuendo about puppets to prevent any fair-minded observer from realizing that, in reality, John Abbott's teachers, in addition to its early administrators and Board members, played an important role in building a pretty fine college after all. The shame of *Pilgrims and Puppets* is its premeditated attempt, motivated by anti-union pique under the guise of history, to deny this obvious and fundamental fact.

Looking back, I offer no apologies for whatever modest input I might have made into JACFA's formative years. I'm not saying we made no mistakes, but somehow our new union managed to get from its founding in 1972 to the end of my presidency in 1975 without a single dispute going to external grievance arbitration,

and a track record of local agreements satisfactory to teachers that was well nigh 100%. Today, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I got at least one thing absolutely right. I persuaded a clear-thinking young colleague to join JACFA's executive, and groomed him as our next president. I brought him onto the Labour Relations Committee, where he developed into a formidable negotiator and a pillar of strength in college life. He may wish I hadn't bothered to mention this, but his name was Jim Leeke. The rest, as they say, is history.

In closing, I wish to acknowledge the support of all the dedicated men and women who helped shoulder JACFA's early burden, and thank them for it all over again. None of us ever received a penny for anything we did, and we had to teach ourselves to be pretty thick-skinned, for not many bouquets were thrown our way either. That's why a lump came to my throat the other day as I re-read, for the first time since November 1974, Oscar's last letter from Australia. "I want to thank you for fighting and winning my case," he wrote. "It's heartening that John Abbott now has people who won't stand by while teachers are being pushed around. The resolution of the Labour Relations Committee was everything I could have asked for. Larry writes me you worked very hard on my case. I'm very grateful for the time and energy you invested in it." Oscar, wherever you are, for another letter like that, I'd do it all again if I could.

Bob Hill,
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Jan. 20, 2007.