Olivar Asselin was born in 1874 in Saint-Hilarion, Charlevoix County, Québec, the fourth child in a family with nine children. Thanks to his maturity and intelligence, he was able to study at the Séminaire de Rimouski where he was nicknamed the “Little Corporal” because of his small size and obvious need to assert himself. He left the school before finishing his studies to emigrate with his family to Fall River, Massachusetts.

There, from his arrival to the age of eighteen, he wrote for Le Protecteur Canadien, the Franco-American newspaper in Fall River. While also working in a factory, he found a way to write a weekly article on politics or economics or even, from time to time, a poem, up until 1894.

He dreamed of becoming a Jesuit, but the death of his father made that impossible since he had to take care of his mother and his younger brothers and sisters.

In March 1894, Adélard Lafond, the editor of Le Protecteur Canadien, offered him a job at the paper. It paid less than his job at the factory, but he accepted the position anyway. When the newspaper went bankrupt the following year, Asselin followed Lafond to Woonsocket, Rhode Island, where the latter founded La Tribune, which only lasted a few months. Asselin then started writing for Le Jean Baptiste of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, before becoming the editor of La Tribune, which had started publishing again. From the beginning of his career, Asselin wrote mostly editorials and columns as well as poetry, rather than simple reports. During the Spanish-American War in 1898, Asselin enlisted as a volunteer in the Rhode Island Regiment and wrote articles encouraging others to do the same. His enlistment earned him American citizenship.
In 1899, he participated in the founding of the Société Historique Franco-Américaine (SHFA). In 1900, he decided to return to Québec after having spent eight years in the United States, important years for his intellectual development.

In Montreal, Asselin became a polemicist for La Patrie and Le Canada before being appointed secretary to Lomer Gouin, who was the Minister of Public Works and Colonization. He married Alice Le Boutillier, of Gaspé, in 1902.

From 1904 to 1908, he was the founder-editor of Nationaliste, a newspaper which sought to promote autonomy in Canada.

As president of the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal, he abolished the “national holiday” parades on St. Jean-Baptiste Day, calling them “grotesque.” He instead asked for the money spent on them to be donated to “our brothers in Ontario,” as they were dealing with Regulation 17 in that province, which limited the teaching of French to only one hour a day.

The church denounced him as an atheist and a Freemason because he favored mandatory secular education.

After leaving the leadership of Nationaliste in 1908, he became a parliamentary correspondent in Québec for La Patrie. But he returned to Nationaliste, which became the weekly edition of Le Devoir in 1910.

He ran as a candidate in the 1911 federal election but was not elected. The Canadian government then sent him on a mission to Europe to study the question of French and Belgian emigration to Canada. His report, published in 1913, demonstrated with supporting evidence that the Canadian government favored immigration from England over immigration from French-speaking countries.
As a soldier in World War I in 1917, he gave a remarkable speech on behalf of the Comité France-Amérique; he was introduced by Gabriel Hanotaux and thanked by Étienne Lamy, both from the Académie Française. The French government named him a chevalier of the Legion of Honor for his military service. In 1919, he was part of the Canadian delegation to the peace conference, taking advantage of his stay in France to work towards renewing ties between French Canada and France. He advocated for creating scholarships and founding a residence for Canadian students in Paris as well as sending a promising young Canadian writer to France each year. Asselin was convinced that the only hope of survival for Québec was to maintain close ties with France.

During the 1920s, he became a publicist, while contributing to *La Revue moderne*. From 1930-1934, he was editor-in-chief of *Canada* before founding two independent newspapers which did not survive: *L’Ordre* and *La Renaissance*.

During these same years, he was very busy helping the elderly, the sick, and the poor. Those who knew him well called him “the Ozanam of Canada” (Frédéric Ozanam was a founder of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul). After his death in 1937, Asselin was buried in the clothing of the Brothers of Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, a French community he had been largely responsible for bringing to Québec.

In 1955, the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Montréal founded the Olivar Asselin Prize, in his honor. It is awarded annually to the best journalist of the year.

Claire QUINTAL

WORKS


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


   English Translation by Ben Geary, Salem State University