Louis-Alphonse BIRON (1861-1947)

Of the approximately 300 French-language newspapers published in New England since the second half of the nineteenth century, two of the most important, *L’Impartial* of Nashua, New Hampshire (1898-1964) and *L’Étoile* of Lowell, Massachusetts (1886-1957), owe their existence to Louis-Alphonse Biron. Born in Québec, Louis-Alphonse Biron was a direct descendant of the first Biron to settle in North America, Pierre Biron of Poitou, France. Originally from Sainte-Hermine in the Vendée, Pierre Biron had come to work for the Jesuits of Québec in the seventeenth century.

Louis-A. Biron was born into a family of farmers on July 28, 1861. He was the son of Étienne Biron and Marie-Louise Laroche of Saint-Louis-de-Lotbinière on the south shore of the St. Lawrence. His mother died young, and the ten Biron children were raised by their grandmother. Louis-A. was only a teenager when his father died, but the education of the orphan was not abandoned; the pastor of Lotbinière decided to take over his education until the age of thirteen. Louis-A. then went on to attend the Séminaire de Nicolet where, for seven years, in addition to gaining a solid academic and cultural foundation, he developed the qualities of perseverance and patience that would mark his life.

Coming from a family that valued literary arts – the poets Pamphilie Lemay and Apollinaire Gingras were his cousins – Louis-A. Biron chose journalism and began his career in Quebec City. He found employment in publishing houses and did a bit of reporting. Despite his ties to his native country, he was attracted to the United States, driven by a taste for adventure and stimulated by the prospect of serving his people, namely the French Canadians who were emigrating to New England by the hundreds of thousands at the time, looking for work and better living conditions. He exchanged letters with his sister Lumina, who was already working as a spinner in the cotton
factories in Manchester, New Hampshire. He therefore settled “in the States,” arriving in 1890 in Manchester, New Hampshire, where he worked for the daily newspaper *L’Avenir National*. He soon became the right-hand man of its founder, Joseph-Édouard Bernier. He then moved to Lowell, Massachusetts, where he collaborated with Maxime Lépine on the newspaper *L’Étoile*, founded in 1886 by the Cercle Canadien of that city.

At that time, the growing French-Canadian population of Nashua, New Hampshire, a nearby city, also wished to have its own French-language publication. In 1898, Louis-A. Biron therefore founded a weekly newspaper, *L’Impartial*, which he passed on to his nephew, Armand Biron, in 1917. Never aspiring to a large circulation, *L’Impartial* nonetheless served twelve thousand compatriots of French-Canadian origin from the three Franco-American parishes in Nashua, up until 1965.

In 1910, Louis-A. Biron married Marie-Annette Thibodeau, a young Québécoise who had graduated from the École normale des Ursulines in Québec. The happy household would welcome three children: Louis, Jeanne (Mrs. Leon Lavallée), and Marthe (Mrs. Laval Péloquin).

1910 was also the year when Louis-A. Biron and his colleague Paul Chaput, founder and publisher of *Le Courrier de Salem*, were able to acquire Lowell’s *L’Étoile*. The weekly newspaper became a daily, and its reorganization made it prosperous. It quickly gained esteem in French-speaking New England. Louis-A. Biron became the sole owner of *L’Étoile* and managed his newspaper successfully. It was a dynamic daily, reflecting the news and deeds of French-speakers in Lowell and the surrounding region, tirelessly defending the interests of the Franco-American ethnic group without ignoring events of national and global importance. But *L’Étoile's* main asset was its ability to capture Franco-American life in New England. *L’Étoile* is an important primary-source document on the Franco-America of its time.
It is important to point out that under the stewardship of Biron, *L’Étoile* became the work of a judiciously chosen and constantly renewed team. Arthur Smith and Charles Daoust, well-known figures of French-language journalism, brought their expertise. The impetuous Wilfrid Beaulieu did an internship there before founding his *Travailleur* in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1931. Edmond Turcotte headed the editorial board of *L’Étoile* for eight years. Among the collaborators who enhanced the literary quality of *L’Étoile* were Yvonne LeMaître, Louis-Alphonse Nolin, O.M.I., and Joseph Laferrière. The Franco-American poet laureate, Rosaire Dion-Lévesque, also published in the columns of *L’Impartial* and *L’Étoile*. The editor during the newspapers last years, Antoine Clément, distinguished himself by the force of his pleas for the cause of an inviolable Franco-American identity.

*L’Étoile* celebrated its golden jubilee in 1937, when the Société Historique Franco-Américaine gave the newspaper and its publisher-owner its Grand Prix Medal. Yet Biron, “a humble man among the humble,” according to his biographer Rosaire Dion-Lévesque, respectfully declined to become an officer of the French honor society, the Palmes académiques. His gesture, in this case, evokes the words that would later be pronounced by Acadian writer Antonine Maillet: “Each of us has only one voice in this life, and this voice must be that of a people.” His mission was its own reward.

The constraints imposed by the Second World War hit *L’Étoile* hard in the 1940s. Published daily until 1943, the newspaper subsequently appeared only three times a week. Despite everything, *L’Étoile* plodded on and reached its golden jubilee. The sacred fire, like French poet Charles Péguy’s little hope, refused to be extinguished. Louis-A. Biron, “the big old oak tree” of the Franco-American press, worked relentlessly to lead his newspaper until pneumonia killed him in the matter of a few days, at the age of 86, on February 23, 1947. With thirty-seven years as
director of *L'Étoile*, Louis-A. Biron was the leader of Franco-American newspaper publisher-owners. The entire Franco-American community felt the loss of one of its most valiant ethnic artisans. Antoine Clément, then editor-in-chief of *L'Étoile*, paid tribute to his employer by stating: “By his simple preservation of the Franco-American newspaper, Monsieur Biron has done an incalculable good for the cultural advancement of the Franco-American population of Lowell . . . His oft-repeated recommendation was to keep this a local newspaper, responding to the needs of our people while offering them the most useful news.”

Louis-A. Biron lives on through his work, *L'Étoile*. He left it to his son, recently discharged from the army, and to his two daughters with the recommendation to continue the work at a deficit for as long as possible. They persevered for ten years. From 1943 to 1952, the newspaper was published three times a week and then twice, until 1957. On August 17, 1957, *L'Étoile* ceased publication forever, but this did not prevent the descendants of Biron from continuing to participate actively in the Francophone movements of the region.

In 1977, the town of Lowell officially paid tribute to Louis-A. Biron. On June 19, 1977, as part of the cultural events of Franco-American Week, the municipal library of Lowell dedicated part of its premises to the memory of Louis-A. Biron. Since that time, the Louis-A. Biron Room of the Lowell Public Library has expanded its collection of thousands of books, periodicals, records, and archives in French. Many resources on Francophones, both local and global, are thus available to the general public.

The work of Louis-A. Biron was also perpetuated by the Francophone cultural activities of his wife and children. Mrs. Marthe Biron-Péloquin, who died on March 12, 2012, was editor of the *Bulletin* of the Fédération Féminine Franco-Américaine for fourteen years as well as president of this French-speaking association. She was also president of the Société Historique Franco-
Américaine and remained very active, throughout her life, in many events promoting Franco-America. In June 1985, Premier René Lévesque of Québec himself awarded her the decoration of the Ordre des Francophones d’Amérique. The French government honored her twice: in 1989, when she became an officer of the Palmes académiques; and in 1990, when she was named an officer of the National Order of Merit. When she received these two distinctions from the General Consul of France in Boston, she thought of her father and said that she accepted them to honor his memory. Her daughter Louise dedicated her doctoral thesis in Paris in 1981 to the phenomenon of Franco-American cultural survival, fifty years after Josaphat Benoit became the first Franco-American to do so in France with his *L’âme franco-américaine*. Louise was decorated with the Gold Medal of the Étoile Civique in 1997 and named chevalier of the Palmes académiques in 2007 for her numerous publications and conferences on the Franco-American community. These two women demonstrate the permanence of the French language and culture that Louis-A. Biron steadfastly promoted throughout his long journalistic career.

Louise PÉLOQUIN, with Marthe BIRON-PÉLOQUIN

ŒUVRE

- His journalism, in *L’Avenir National* (Manchester, NH), *L’Impartial* (Nashua, NH), and especially *L’Étoile* (Lowell, Massachusetts).

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