

Classic Poetry Series

Antoine Gérin-Lajoie
- poems -

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Antoine Gérin-Lajoie(4 August 1824 – 4 August 1882)

Antoine Gérin-Lajoie (August 4, 1824 in Yamachiche, Quebec – August 4, 1882 in Ottawa) was a Québécois Canadian poet and novelist.

A member of the first generation of Quebec romantics imbued with the fervor of political revolution and historical nationalism, Antoine Gérin-Lajoie is remembered for his plaintive lament "Un Canadian errant" (1865) and his classic of nineteenth-century Quebec fiction, *Jean Rivard* (1874, 1876; originally published serially in 1862 and 1864), a "roman du terroir," preaching the nationalist myth of agriculturalism.

Gérin-Lajoie was born at Sainte-Anne-de-Yamachiche into the habitant family of Antoine and Marie Gélinas Gérin-Lajoie, whose house is today a museum, a monument to their traditional rural life that was to inspire Jean Rivard, a book full of nostalgic memories. Early in his career at the local school, Gérin-Lajoie won prizes and, with the priest's encouragement, was sent to the classical college at Nicolet for what his son, Léon Gérin, has described as a "brilliant career," his mark on college life made through his literary efforts. Always an avid reader of French classics, by fifteen he had made "attempts at rhyme," which were discouraged by his teachers. Nonetheless, he contributed occasional verse on college events, thus becoming laureate de facto.

The crowning creation of his college career, *Le Jeune Latour* (1844), a verse drama in the French classical mode, is based on an episode in Michel Bibaud's *L'Histoire du Canada, sous la domination française* (1843), depicting the conflict between a son and father on opposing sides in the battle for Acadia. The father, in exchange for a young English bride, has promised the English that he will hand over to them the last fort in Acadia under French control, a fort under the charge of his son, Roger Latour. The young man remains faithful to the French, despite his father's entreaties. The latter is rejected by his men. Although the appearance of the play earned the author twenty-five dollars from the governor-general, its fortunes declined after publication. Baudoin Berger, in the preface to a reedition (1969), reveals the historical interest of the play for, despite Gérin-Lajoie's inability to delve into the psychology of his characters and produce dramatic tension, he locates in the Corneillian conflict between familial love and patriotic duty a subject that has been of continuing interest to Quebec novelists and cineasts.

Ill-prepared to earn his living, Gérin-Lajoie's life declined upon leaving college. Plans to learn English in New York before further studies in Paris collapsed when he failed to find work immediately. He then took up legal studies in Montreal and entered on a period of his life recorded in letters of his character Gustave Charmenil (in Jean Rivard), a legal student, sometime teacher, translator, and hack writer, whose excessive timidity and scruples, lack of connections, and poverty are those of his creator. A journalist at La Minerve, Gérin-Lajoie was very active in the intellectual life of Montreal as founder, president, and active speaker of the Institute Canadien. Called to the bar in 1848, he made several abortive attempts to set up practice, followed by several tries at journalism and different administrative posts, finally entering the public service in 1852 as a translator. In 1860 he became parliamentary librarian, a post he held until his death.

During this period of occupational uncertainty, Gérin-Lajoie wrote *Catéchisme politique* (1851), the first guide to the parliamentary institutions of the Canadian union in a question-and-answer form. The young poet in Gérin-Lajoie was dead: his literary productions became increasingly didactic and practical. A move from Toronto to Quebec in 1860 with his new wife, Josephine née Parent, whom he had married in 1858, ushered in a period of intense literary activity with Gérin-Lajoie becoming creditor of two significant literary periodicals, *Les Soirées Canadiennes* (1861), and *Le Foyer Canadien* (1863). Demonstrating his belief in the need for practical rather than imaginative literature, Gérin-Lajoie published serially in these journals his *Jean Rivard, le défricheur* (in *Les Soirées Canadiennes*) and *Jean Rivard, l'économiste* (in *Le Foyer Canadien*). The realism of the novel manifests itself in its autobiographical component and its balance sheets--statements of prices paid, agricultural earning, and statistics from economic publications--designed to prove farming an attractive financial proposition. Fortunately for the reader the author does not always follow his precepts, and this didacticism is merged in an epic that has proven enduring, and often repeated in Quebec literature, the story of the conquest of "virgin soil." Living out Gérin-Lajoie's dream, in contrast to Gustave, who shares the author's life style, Jean Rivard, an enterprising but poor college graduate, procures land in the eastern townships and, felling trees to grow wheat, orchards, and flowers, makes himself a "paradis terrestre." The first part follows his success on the land up to his marriage with a sensible farm girl, the narrative punctuated with the classic rituals of such rural idylls--husking bees, barn raising, and sugaring off. Characterization is flat and wooden, events serving as demonstrations of the heroism of Jean, who overcomes every difficulty.

Part 2 depicts the social action of this hero, who founds the village of Louiseville, setting up a model community, giving priority to producers (inspired by the theories of Frédéric Le Play), and instituting public education. For his work Jean

is elected to Parliament, where he helps to shape the nation's destiny. Gérin-Lajoie, too, made an impact on his people: his novel was reprinted continuously for distribution to students and became, in Camille Roy's words, "une sorte d'évangile rustique de la race" (a sort of rustic Bible for our people). Today it is of most interest to historians, since, as Maurice Lemire says, it is "one of the most complete expressions of an ideology that for a long time supported the ideal of 'survivance.'"

Invalidated by a stroke in 1880, Gérin-Lajoie succumbed to another one in 1882. Two posthumous works appeared: *Dix Ans au Canada* (1888), a lucid, impartial history of the period of struggle for responsible government that established his reputation in academic circles. Abbé Casgrain selected episodes from the journals Gérin-Lajoie had kept since 1849, including observations on his writing, and published them as *A. Gérin-Lajoie d'après ses mémoires* (1886). Whether it was the poor economic conditions for writers in Quebec or the conflicts of his personality that led to a suspicion of his own imagination, the promise of the enthusiastic student was never realized in his mature works. His claim to historical interest lies in his pioneering ability to detect significant plot outlines for Quebec literature and to understand the social and intellectual movements of his own time.

Un Canadien Errant

Antoine Gérin-Lajoie