

ABOVE ALL, WESTMOUNT

Despite exploding mailboxes, the Parti Québécois victory, and prophecies of doom, the anglophone enclave of Westmount survived Québec's turbulence intact. It always has, and always will

THE RICH are supposed to live in the house on the hill, but they seldom do. In London they cluster around the parks, in Paris by the river, New York's rich inhabit towers as anonymous as office blocks, while Toronto's wealthy huddle in the ravines and crescents of Rosedale and Forest Hill. Montréal is the exception which proves the rule: it has Westmount.

Westmount, Québec, is itself a city. It has its own mayor, a council, and fire department. But Westmount is also a mountain, the smaller sister to Mount Royal, Montréal's extinct volcano; and the way its homes dominate the island has made it a symbol of privilege. That would probably be true even if its inhabitants were largely French-speaking, but Westmount has always been an English enclave and it is still about eighty per cent English-speaking. Its place in Québec brings to mind a small-scale Hong Kong, a large-scale Algiers. In Hong Kong the strangers on the hill were bought out; in Algiers they were thrown out. Through the 1960s and 1970s many thought it was only a question of time before Westmount met one or the other fate.

In May, 1963, Westmount's mailboxes began exploding, and the little girls of Miss Edgar's and Miss Cramp's were marched in orderly fashion up Mount Royal when a phone call threatened to blow up their school. In 1968 the Parti Québécois was formed, and its popular leader, René Lévesque, was soon to refer to English Quebecers as "white Rhodesians." In 1970 the War Measures Act was proclaimed, and soldiers patrolled Westmount's streets. Then, in 1976, the PQ came to power, promising a referendum on Québec's future in Canada.

Those were traumatic years. If once Westmount was a stately matron looking down her long nose on the poor of Montréal, she was now a spoiled tomboy trying to hide from a gang of urchins. Suddenly it was

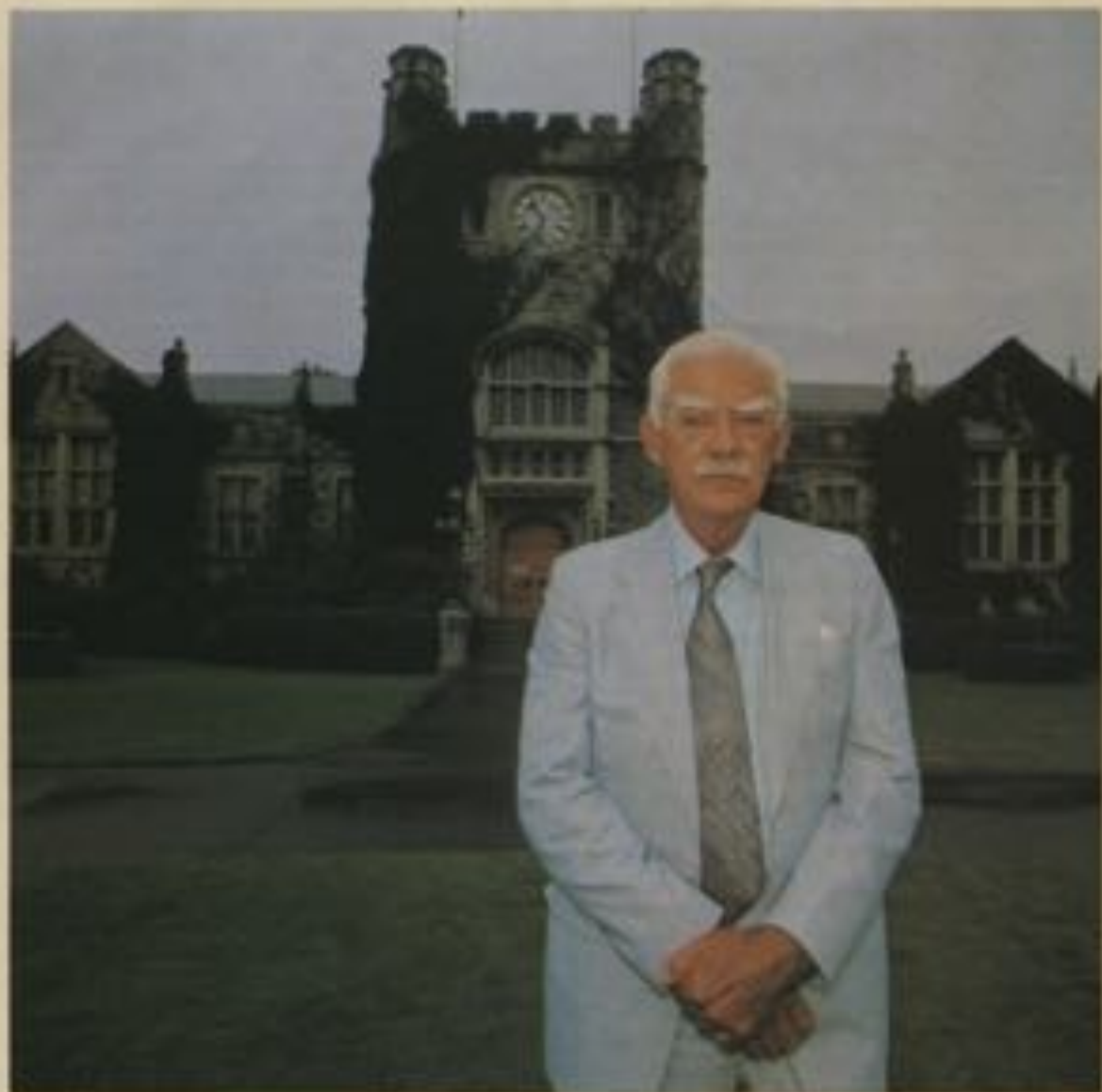
no advantage to be up so high, so neat and distinguished; that simply made an easy and provocative target. Many were embarrassed to say they were from Westmount, especially among their French-Canadian associates. The old confidence seemed destroyed.

If other Canadians, seeing the flames from Québec, were concerned in some theoretical sense, the people of Westmount were in the fire. Are we colonists? Are we exploiters? If so, what can we do about it? Do our 200 years here mean nothing? Should we leave? Should we assimilate? Are we really frivolous, mean-minded people? Is it our fault if we were born in Westmount?

It is arguable that no other community in Canada has ever done such soul-searching. Families and friends were split apart. Thousands of people, unable to bear the heat, unaccustomed to facing doubt, packed up and left the only home they, their fathers, their grandfathers, and great-grandfathers had ever known. The dominant image was a "For Sale" sign on an immaculate lawn outside a Tudor greystone. Westmounters were almost giving away their homes in the rush to escape to the security of Toronto and Calgary. They jocularly called themselves "the exile people," but their sense of being exiles (even refugees) was no joke. Like White Russians in Paris or Cubans in Miami, they gathered in distant cities and remembered better times.

But the revolution never came, at least not in the form the nightmares had taken. The bombings stopped, the referendum on sovereignty-association was defeated, and only the French signs above the shops on Greene Avenue remained as evidence of the turmoil. Cautiously, out of nostalgia and curiosity, those who had left began to return — some to stay, most to visit their more courageous or foolhardy relatives and friends. They found Montréal dirtier

BY RON GRAHAM/PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIGEL DICKSON



DONALD MACCALLUM

"We think the city looks extremely sloppy when cars are parked all over the streets at night"

and in the hands of tacky high-rise developers, but that was only to be expected from a mayor who had propelled his city into the stratosphere of debt.

The surprise was Westmount. It looked exactly the same. Better, in fact, for the trees were fuller, and you could now get a drink at Nick's (Chez Nick). Not only that, but those cousins who had been too dumb to get out while the getting was good were now being offered more for their "perfect townhouse for small family, near shopping, sunny" than the "most beautiful, top of mountain, nine bedrooms, stone, detached" had sold for three years earlier. What the hell had happened?

UNTIL recently the Anwater station was the western end of Montréal's subway line. That, and the fact that it exited into the Forum, made it a popular junction, and in 1967 the Alexis Nihon Plaza was built on top of it. Alexis Nihon is a concrete mish-mash of apartments, offices, parking levels, and shopping malls on the border between Montréal and Westmount. An endless crowd passes through its five-storey, glassed-in court, which yowls relentlessly with Muzak and pinball machines. It's like a midway carnival housed in a power station. Outside the Miracle Mart, burns, bag ladies, pensioners, and teenagers stare from benches under pseudo-Victorian streetlamps, made unnecessary by the sickly green fluorescence. They probably don't realize they're in Westmount, but then Westmount doesn't recognize them either. It "shares" them with Montréal, abandoning its southeast edge as if it were territory occupied by barbarians. True, the Maidenhead Inn, the café Gigolette, and the Bali-Hi bars are tucked into Montréal's corner; true, the prostitutes and young dope-peddlers have the instinct not to stray across the invisible frontier, but Anwater is so remote from Westmount's consciousness that a McDonald's golden arch was allowed to rise there in 1976.

If you turn away from the plaza and the *mitrs*, there is a long, beige, empty tunnel. The lights do not glare. The noise recedes until there is only your footstep, unless you encounter a guitar-strumming singer. (The last busker I saw there was the younger son of a family who lived on the top of the mountain. There was some loose change in his open case. Recognizing me from school, he turned away.) At the end there is a long, tall mirror into which everyone furtively glances before entering the glass doors of Westmount Square.

There is no Muzak, hardly any sound at all. There are no benches to encourage loitering, and the newsstand is made of chrome and mirrors. The soft lighting enhances the elegance of the boutiques. Lily Simon and Ralph Lauren have replaced Tip Top Tailors and People's Credit Jewellers. Chic women and athletic men abound.

But this isn't really Westmount either. This is Toronto, Chicago, Milan perhaps; Westmount has never taken even this sleek "development" to heart. Alexis Nihon was one thing, a freak confined to an area already spoiled by the traffic around the Forum. Westmount Square penetrated right to Greene Avenue, edged the old townhouses on Wood, and had three black towers rising twenty-odd floors. So what if it was heralded as one of Mies van der Rohe's most beautiful works? So what if its apartments were luxurious and its boutiques the last word in sophistication? It was black, it blocked the view, and it didn't fit in; no architectural awards would make Westmount think otherwise. Across the street on Greene, Ohman's jewellery, established 1899, with its bay window, was elegance enough. Smithers' shoe store, around the corner, had the most up-to-date Hart's brogues.

Ironically, by being among the last people in the world to oppose black-and-white Bauhaus simplicity, Westmounters now find themselves in the vanguard of post-modern classicism.

"The last thirty years haven't been good for our cities," says Peter Rose, a young Westmount resident who has made a name for himself as one of Canada's brightest new architects. "In the name of the future, we tore them up. Now there's a return to history, to preservation, to a connection with the past. The places that turn out to be the best are the places that escaped the heat of the advance, places that were full of paranoids who didn't want anything to change or places too poor to take advantage of the advances. I think Westmount is a national treasure. It has the finest architecture in the country, it's a real community, and it should be an example for future ones. Once we get rid of our inappropriate modernist, futurist, technological attitudes, it will be a great learning ground."

WESTMOUNT'S history began when Côte St-Antoine was an Indian trail. Its oldest house, the Hurtubise farm, dates from 1690. It stands to this day mainly because of heritage-conscious citizens like Alice Lighthall, a bright-eyed lady with a *piqué*'s laugh who has lived more than eighty years in Westmount. Her father was its mayor at the turn of the century. She still takes a guardian's interest in the Hurtubise house and likes to show off its thick stone walls, fat cedar beams, and the basement shelter built against Indian attacks. By the mid-nineteenth century, those earliest French grants began to be broken up and sold off to English merchants, who built country estates on the fertile land amid the famous orchards. Captain William Murray bought from the Ledacs in 1849, for example.

"When we were small children," Miss Lighthall says, "our playground was partly the Murrays' fields and partly the Raynes' orchards. The whole hillside was full of streams."



ALICE LIGHTHALL

*"When we were small children, the whole
hillside was full of streams"*

Under the pressure of Montréal's western expansion, those English estates were in turn broken up. The city of Westmount emerged in 1874 and took its present shape in 1890. Its purpose was to give the English control over their own community, particularly their schools. From the start it was carefully managed and deliberately built, its planning softened by the topography, with parks, fine libraries, public buildings, and churches. No hotels, no bars, no industry, and a minimum of retail services. As Miss Lighthall puts it, "It was all a question of solidity. The city was just a good, solid development."

Not that it achieved social pre-eminence at once. After all, there was still a toll-gate at Greene Avenue, and cattle grazed beside the earliest terraces. Montréal's élite were firmly established in the square mile to the east, about where the Ritz-Carlton Hotel stands today. One prominent lady in the 1920s reacted in horror and sadness upon hearing that her son-in-law intended to move beyond Atwater: "To think that a daughter of mine would live in Westmount!"

But the new city had much to offer: fresh air, fine views, open spaces, a good administration. Remarkably it can still offer those things, two minutes from downtown. The Westmount of today is more or less the Westmount of sixty years ago. Even the population — 22,000 — is about the same. The streets were designed to be short, narrow, and sensitive to every spur, glen, and rise. The sidewalks were lined with grass and shaded by elms, maples, and chestnuts. Then the good, solid houses went up, all the way up to the summit: Gothic greystones, Italianate villas, Jacobean palaces, Scottish castles, Tudor cottages, a southern colonial mansion, and French-Canadian stone farms magnified to the grand scale, with bays, façades, porches, turrets, mansard roofs, gables, coloured bricks, wooden timbers, glass greenhouses, and gardens everywhere.

"It is a paradise of sorts, a real find," Peter Rose observes. "It is a rich and eclectic mixture of architectural expression, dating from a particularly wonderful time in North American building. It was built from the traditions that were in our blood, in our bones. No one had to lay down the rules. The individual had his own domain, but it was not at the expense of anyone else's."

Such were Westmount's splendours that, in 1933, a certain Charles Benedict was moved to compose an entire volume of verse to her glories, to her traffic lights and her new park, to her police force and her fire brigade, even to her mosquitoes. It ends on the stirring note:

*If I should ever hang my harp
By Babylon's towers,
I'll ne'er forget thee, Westmount, or
Thy short-skirt, bob-hair'd daughters.*

If others choose to laugh, that's all right — they're probably jealous. Besides, there is always the suspicion in Westmount that when the laughter stops, the bombings will begin again.

MY CHILDHOOD was spent in Westmount. At first we lived near the bottom of the slope, not far above Greene Avenue. Then in 1953, when I was five, we moved up to a small circle which sat on a spur just below the summit. The house was an imposing, three-storey greystone of Tudor style, built in the late 1920s. It was perched on the edge of a cliff and looked over to the western side of Mount Royal. By most standards it was enormous, but it backed on a truly rambling property (owned by a Greek) and was matched by at least two other houses on the circle, so it never seemed out of the ordinary to a child. There was a large garden, which dipped and rolled with the unruly contours that make Westmount so odd. It had a twisted hawthorn good for climbing and a large weeping willow under which we sat for family portraits. It was not extraordinary to see pheasants, rabbits, and even a fox crossing the lawn in the evening from the dense woods that clung to the hillside below us. At night we felt we were in the country. Montréal a glowing hump in the distance. Coming home late we would run into the house in case someone was lurking in the woods, and the worst chore was to turn out the lights in the basement when Father was away on a business trip: then the house became dark and spooky.

The street circled a small park whose trees and rocky mounds became exotic worlds in our imaginations, and in winter the ploughs piled snow around its edges to make magnificent fortresses. There were six houses on the circle, occupied by a French-Canadian urban planner, a McGill law professor, two prominent Anglo families, a Jewish factory-owner, and ourselves. We all knew everything about one another, yet I can't recall myself or my parents ever visiting, or being visited.

The circle was the heart of my childhood. Mother might take me down to Howarth's for a new pair of grey flannels; Uncle Harry's schoolbus might take me down to Selwyn House School on dreary October mornings; the whole family might be taken to Magog or Cape Cod for the summer; but I always returned to the circle with a special affection. "Don't leave the circle," Mother used to say as she zipped me into my snowsuit.

"Don't leave the circle," she repeated years later as I set off on my green Raleigh three-speed. But why would I want to leave! The Borden's milkman would soon be arriving with the Davy Crockett coupons, and he always let me ride around the circle in his van. And at seven I was in love with a redhead named Zandy, who had one of those plastic sheets (from New York!) that you put on the TV screen to decipher secret messages, and who once let me kiss her under the old Washington lamp-post.

The circle was a quiet, private place which centred on the family and a few other children. In winter a strange car was so rare that I'd take its licence number to give to the police if a murder or a robbery occurred. Sundays in the summer, however, were different. Then the circle filled bumper-to-bumper with sight-



GEORGE SMITHERS

*"We're all antiques around here. I'm worth
more in antiques than I am in shoes"*

seers, Americans and Montrealers, who came up to gawk at the big houses. Fortunately the tour-buses that groaned and fumed up to the summit look-out and the bird sanctuary couldn't navigate our tiny ring. (They stopped coming recently, after Summit Circle protesters blocked their way with bikes and bodies.) But the cars packed with families were bad enough. Little ladies from Pennsylvania and Ohio were satisfied by a snapshot of the cute natives, but the kids our age hung out the rear windows of their fathers' Chevrolets and glowered so menacingly that we were discouraged from going out at all.

We retaliated by going on Sunday drives ourselves. After lunch we headed off to explore the parts of Montréal from which those families spinning around our circle had come. A favourite trip was to the Midgents' Palace, a house in which everything had been miniaturized for a family of small people. That meant passing through Outremont, a French-speaking Westmount minus the view; then along St. Urbain Street, which Mordecai Richler has made famous; and finally into the working-class districts around St. Lawrence Boulevard.

That was always an excitement for me. Compared to the circle, where someone walking a dog was an event, the streets reverberated with action. Gangs of children ran between cars in games of tag and baseball, and they seemed fearless and free. Fathers in undershirts talked to each other at the bottom of spiralling stairways, and mothers shouted to their kids from high balconies. There was a candy store on every corner. I didn't understand the hardness of those lives, but I was intrigued. On the circle we seemed isolated, over-protected, fearful, well-ordered; our houses looked inward and our lives were solid. Downtown everything was rough-and-tumble, and the streets ran flat and straight all the way to the horizon.

WESTMOUNT endures because it has tradition and social authority on its side. People dress up in Westmount. There are no hair-curlers on Greene Avenue, and no one hurries. Houses are kept up, lawns cleared at night. It's as if everyone is trying to prove he's worthy of such a neat, well-run place. Senior citizens, dressed in gleaming whites, still lawn-bowled outside their eighty-year-old, green-shingled clubhouse, oblivious to traffic along Sherbrooke Street. A giant clock decorated with flowers turns slowly outside Victoria Hall, and in King George Park nannies push black perambulators past the shaded pavilion. The Avenue Theatre, though it no longer shows British films exclusively, still has a private screening room with sofas and armchairs, and it seems appropriate that Reader's Digest (Canada) and the Québec RCMP have made Westmount their headquarters.

Greene Avenue, despite the black geometry of Westmount Square, remains essentially an English high street, a two-block fass of family shops and village

services. At one end it drops into the social oblivion below the CPR tracks. At the other, above Sherbrooke Street, the mountain itself rises abruptly and magnificently, a thick green ridge in summer, dotted with houses up to the summit. Down its slopes Ford Country Squires and Volkswagen Rabbits carry earnest young women and their bored children for a late morning of chores: Tony's for shoes, Alexander's for a watch repair, and perhaps the Tennis Bug/Boutique de Tennis. If the kids aren't too restless, there might be time to glance in the window of LePage (once Westmount Realities) to see how house prices are holding up, or to drop into the Double Hook, the all-Canadian bookstore, to pick up Mordecai Richler's latest before lurching on tofu sandwiches and amandine yoghurt in the Old Post Office, a domed and columned neo-baroque edifice saved by citizen agitation and turned into a repository of trendy boutiques.

Richler's *Jubus Then and Now* was read with particular interest in Westmount because it is partly set there, and everyone looked forward to the vicarious thrill of being savagely mocked by a famous author. However, the more pretentious Jewish arriviste bore the brunt of the satire; the staid town and its old-money Anglos got off lightly. They seemed dignified, sympathetic, rather tragic figures, though corrupt in essence, and their lives were portrayed with skilful accuracy. That was a long way from the pompous caricatures Daddy Kravitz had found when he first climbed to the summit and thought it a great site for a restaurant, but then Richler himself had been living in a mansion up on Edgehill since his return from England in 1972.

Another literary citizen with a sharp wit, F. R. Scott, lives on the lower slope, as do many artists and academics. (Westmount likes to boast that it has almost 5,000 university graduates and more than a hundred published authors.) Scott once described his street in a poem called "Calamity," which concerned a laundry truck that had rolled down the hill and crashed into his maple.

*Normally we do not speak to one another on
this avenue,
But the excitement made us almost neighbours.
People exchanged remarks
Who had never been introduced
And for a while we were quite human...
The towing truck soon followed,
Order was restored.
The starch came raining down.*

Westmounters identify strongly with their town, but it takes a calamity to get them interested in it. They live there so they won't have to be bothered; once roused, however, they can get more worked up about an axed chestnut tree than about a dozen bombs. A municipal proposal to leash dogs developed into a furor that has wrecked many a cocktail party with tears and acrimony. The reduction of an annual gift of maple syrup to the Queen caused enough fuss to make CBS and NBC. And then there was the Great Parking Fiasco, which *The Westmount Examiner* called "the greatest



DAVID CARRUTHERS

*"In five years Westmount has become out
of reach to people like myself"*

council-citizen confrontation in years." It lasted nine months.

Westmount has a parking problem. As many people come into the city to work as go out, and the few commercial streets are jammed all day. In February, 1980, Donald MacCallum, the mayor, proposed a set of severe regulations which didn't affect the daytime situation but banned cars from parking on the streets at night. The mayor, who looks like Colonel Sanders after a month on the Scarsdale Diet, was concerned about the charm of the city. "We think the city looks extremely sloppy and untidy when cars are parked all over the streets at night."

"If you're so damned worried about aesthetics," an irate citizen shot back, "why not ban parking during the day, when people are awake?"

Why indeed? David Carruthers, a young alderman who represents the left wing of the council, opposed the regulations. "I couldn't believe that things would be taken to such an extreme. Their position was that you don't leave your *jeep* lying around the streets of Westmount at night. It was suggestive of a very strange toilet-training on their part."

To young Westmounters like Carruthers, many of whom are professionals who learned their activism in the 1960s, Westmount is an attractive *abintown* community, not a garden suburb. Cars do not offend them. More than 2,000 people signed a petition against the mayor's scheme, and a hundred angry residents stormed a council meeting with "name-calling, open swearing, and vows of civil disobedience," as *The Examiner* reported. The mayor retreated on the parking issue, but Westmount still collects its garbage from the backs of houses in order to avoid having to see it.

Municipal politics is a new phenomenon. Before 1971 the seats for mayor and aldermen were rarely contested; the candidates were selected by the Westmount Municipal Association. Then, with the North American interest in community affairs, Québec set up regular elections which helped focus attention on local issues and prohibited the WMA from nominating candidates without becoming a political party. The effect has been to produce more vocal and critical aldermen and a range of ideological views. MacCallum often finds himself caught up in controversy.

The mayor of Westmount was traditionally a ceremonial public figure, called on to preside over the monthly council meeting, turn a few sods, greet visiting royalty, sip a glass of sherry, and go home. Since 1913 Westmount has been run by a general manager. (It was the first city in Canada, the fifteenth in North America, to have one.) Things worked well. The garbage and the snow were taken away, tax rates were reasonable, and there was never a breath of scandal. Citizens were satisfied and therefore apathetic. As Charles Benedict wrote in his ode to the "General Manager":

*So Westmount's G-M we salute -
From troubles we are rid,
As long as, at the City Hall,
He's sitting on the lid.*

SINCE Donald MacCallum took office in 1975, however, things have been different. An engineer who last year retired from his own engineering firm, MacCallum has had the time and the inclination to be an active mayor. He's also on the executive committee of the Montreal Urban Community, the island's metropolitan government, and is vice-president of the Conference for Suburban Mayors. "The mayor now has a more active job," he says, "particularly because of the MUC. The demands are infinitely greater."

John Sancton, the editor-publisher of *The Examiner*, views it differently. "Poor Norman Dawe, the city manager, now has this bloody mayor sitting right across the hall from him day after day, taking his time, suggesting this, do this, do that. It's getting worse and worse. The mayor's pretty well muzzled the rest of the council. He's made himself the spokesman for the whole bloody city apparatus, and it's becoming damned unhealthy."

"Take the parking issue. The professionals went out and got the information. Then the mayor kept all this to himself and wouldn't let a goddamn soul know what was going on. Then he came out with a pronouncement that was just totally impractical."

"It's a vendetta by the editor of *The Examiner*," MacCallum replies. "I am here and available to management more often than anyone prior to me, but I make a terrific point not to interfere in management in any way, shape, or form. I'm very democratic by nature. I don't know what the hell *The Examiner* is talking about."

"The mayor thinks he's God's gift to public relations," Sancton counters. "But you should hear him in council sometimes. He can be outright insulting to citizens."

I went along to a council meeting one hot July evening, partly because I couldn't believe that the community's severe introspection had taken the form in 1981 of personality clashes over parking regulations. The council chamber in the city hall has been renovated into standard public convenience, a fluorescent haze of flags, metallic furniture, and atrocious portraits. A dozen citizens were in attendance. The mayor sat with his six aldermen (two of them women) and faced the clerks, the city manager, and the press table.

The council proceeded efficiently through an hour's business about fences and supplementary budgets. Alderman André Gervais welcomed the new police director in French. A woman complained about the ladies' shower at the pool. A resident asked about mysterious yellow markings on his street; he was worried that the old lamp-posts were about to be replaced by mercury vapour lights. The mayor forced him to read aloud the city's letter on the subject, while the councillors shuffled their papers with embarrassment. Another resident thanked the council for putting benches and flowers at the bus-stop near Victoria Avenue. The meeting adjourned.



RON GRAHAM

*"We all knew everything about one another, yet I
can't recall ever visiting or being visited"*

Then the council went into committee. That's where decisions are really made and where the feuding gets heated. It's not unknown for the distinguished councillors to resort to calling each other idiots and fools as they rip into the mayor's parking proposal. Such squabbling is meant to be kept under wraps. "There is a faint tendency for things to get out of committee of council," says the mayor, "which is entirely a secret meeting. That's the kind of leak I detest."

"This is an area in which Westmount is changing," John Sancton claims, "and it's very unfortunate. The family compact idea is breaking up, the city council is no longer run like a St. James Street boardroom, but at least you could talk to those guys and the general manager ran the city. There used to be a free and easy relationship with city hall until this mayor made running Westmount a full-time job. The morale of the city staff is down, but everyone is afraid to tell him. No one seems to want to cross him up. He goes into terrible fits of anger, so rather than have those rows they don't say anything. One of these days they're just going to have to take hold and say, 'Look, we have a manager running this city. Keep your goddamn nose out of it.'"

Alderman David Carruthers takes a less pessimistic view. "MacCallum has made a bit of a hash of the principle of the general manager system, but I don't think it's a fundamental thing. Once he goes, it'll revert to something more sensible, and be healthier for that. Besides, we're not doing too badly."

Not badly at all. In the last two years Westmount has had surpluses totalling more than \$2.5 million. As long as it has that kind of administration, Westmount doesn't want to know that its aldermen are calling each other idiots in committee. Westmount wants everyone to behave like ladies and gentlemen. After all, there are standards to uphold.

HAS so little really changed in Westmount? How is it possible? Things looked so bad so recently. Thousands left; the community was weakened; and there was a resigned sadness which lingers still. It is this which gives those who stayed the dignity edging on pathos that Richler conveys in *Ashtar* *Thou and Now*. Richler portrays losers who are almost harmless and certainly wiser and more gentle for their harsh passage. It's as if there's a new tribe wandering in the desert kingdoms of Mammon, remembering their own lost land. Without any sense of irony, Westmounters refer to "the exodus."

But it is perhaps too easy to romanticize. Many left for sound, practical reasons: high taxes, pinching social legislation, head-office transfers, job opportunities for the kids, the bonanza in the West. Many who stayed had plenty of cushions to soften their fall, and they hardly want to be pitied. Especially now that thousands more have come into the city and house prices are soaring again. The highest sales before the referendum were in the range of \$160,000; now the

average sale is estimated at \$225,000. The value of homes climbed forty-six per cent last year, there were fourteen house starts, and some houses on the summit went for close to a million dollars.

"At this point no one knows who's living on the top of the mountain," MacCallum says, "because the houses are changing so fast. However, we do know that there are a lot of foreigners here who weren't here before, particularly up on top."

That seems to be the impression of real-estate agents too. Italians, a couple of Arabs, some Japanese, and several South Americans have been paying cash for the bigger houses, attracted by the location, the devalued dollar, and the security. Westmount is still a bargain in North America.

The old community isn't really affected by these new residents. Anyone who wants to keep a small castle, when fuel bills are astronomical and servants impossible to find, is welcome to it. (Even Richler abandoned his house because keeping it no longer made sense.) The top of the mountain has always been rather remote anyway, and it is still dominated by corporate executives, whose companies sometimes buy the mansions.

Meanwhile, the slope and the plateau remain remarkably unchanged. Those who left have been replaced by the same type: anglophone, well-paid, educated, upwardly mobile, middle-aged professionals and managers who quickly become interested in keeping Westmount exactly as it is. Even their accents change rapidly to the Westmount sound, which actors (usually in satirical plays) never get quite right: a true mid-Atlantic voice, sharper and less twangy than Canadian, flatter and less silted than British, often spoken loudly. Recently there has also been a subconscious absorption of French words, sometimes with French pronunciation, sometimes transformed into English. Westmounters announce that they're going to the latest "exposition" at the museum, and they're even caught "commanding" a taxi. But this is not strange in a city where more than half the citizens are functionally bilingual.

There seems to have been no dramatic increase in the number of French Canadians in Westmount, as there has been in other English suburbs of Montréal. They remain about twenty per cent of the population, roughly equal in number to Westmount's Jewish residents. On the whole, French Canadians are still shy of the place and, if they have the money, prefer to find something equivalent in Outremont. Those who do come into Westmount tend to be those whose businesses and professions have drawn them more and more into the English-speaking world.

The old style is thus being reinforced, and house prices are helping the process. Many of the artists, academics, and young professionals who came in when prices were low are being squeezed out by the demand and the increased valuations.

"In five years this city has become out of reach to people like myself," Alderman David Carruthers ob-

serves. Once a university teacher and labour economist, he is a maker of fine paper. "Now I would be effectively frozen out. One hundred and seventy thousand dollars for little shit-boxes. That's depressing."

The energy that keeps the community from absolute atrophy is threatened. The town grows older. There is a disproportionately high number of the old and widowed, some of them fixed-income poor in the middle of affluence. Kids leave to find work. Families grow smaller. Young couples can't afford to start up here or move gradually up the hill, as was the old pattern. Each year the population ages and decreases.

"I think the subdivision of the big properties is a good thing," Carruthers adds. "I don't like the idea of the town going from 25,000 to 22,000 and maybe down to 19,000. I'd like to see the subdivision of the big old houses into flats and condominiums. Firstly, to get people in. Secondly, to increase the viability of the big houses, because they're good houses and have a good look to them. And thirdly, to allow people of less than princely income to come into this town. That's something I pushed for in council, and we got part-way down the road before running into a fair amount of resistance."

Peter Rose, who heads the Westmount Municipal Association's advisory committee on architecture, generally agrees on subdividing the houses, but not the lots. As he sees it, those large gardens are part of the public domain, even if they can't be used. On this he's allied with Alice Lighthall. "Subdivision shouldn't be allowed anymore," she declares vehemently. "It was all right when there was plenty of land and room for large houses, but we're dead against it now." Her eyes glow and her voice tightens. "Fortunately the Westmount council has been roused by the protests of the citizenry against these developments." An observer of the Westmount Square skirmish, the Greene Avenue preservation fight, the extension of Dorchester Boulevard war, and the Ville-Marie Expressway battle, she has a new campaign.

BEHIND parking issues and subdivision quarrels, a political edginess remains. From time to time something comes along and demonstrates that the atmosphere of complacency will never again be exactly as it was. In the summer of 1981 it was the case of Haines Fine Food Market.

Haines is an old grocery shop on St. Catherine Street, west of Greene Avenue. It had seen better days when Mr. Haines sold it to Heinrich Ribicki in 1971. The Ribickis had come to Canada in 1957 and their dream was to have a family business, drawing on Ribicki's skill as a butcher. Haines was their "chance to do something for the Westmount people," as Ribicki puts it. His reputation spread and soon business was good, at a time when other old Westmount shops like Dionne's and Gordon's were closing their doors.

When the Parti Québécois came to power in 1976, it introduced legislation designed to promote the use of French throughout the province. Commercial signs had to be in French, and inspectors were sent around to make sure merchants complied. In many cases it was a simple matter of removing a possessive from a personal name — *Eaton's* became *Eaton* and everyone was happy.

George Smithers, in the shoe shop down the street, just papered over the English words on his outdoor sign, removed his inside displays, and scratched his head about what to do with all the boxes marked Buster Brown.

He assumed I was a language inspector when I showed up with a notebook. "They come in here to stir up trouble," he sighed. He's seventy-two and his shop is ninety-one. There are wood-pegged benches, hand-made wooden ladders, an antique cash-register, and a huge roll-top desk. His customers won't allow him to change a thing, although a TV does spew out a soap-opera on a slow July afternoon. "They tell me to take down a sign, I take it down. What can you do? Play ball, that's all. A lot of my customers have left. It's not the same." He flicks through an old-fashioned, hand-written ledger and points out names in Ontario, British Columbia, and Massachusetts. "We're all antiques around here. I'm worth more in antiques than I am in shoes."

Twedy Clothes next door pulled down "Clothes" in what looks like a fit of pique, and Greene Avenue Florists ripped off "Florists." Heinrich Ribicki was less willing to play ball. "They started coming in 1979. They put pressure on me. They were bugging me so much, too often." His voice is soft and thickly accented. He is short, bald, and fifty-seven years old. His red face sets off his glasses and his white fringe.

First it was the "Serve Yourself" notice on the fridge. Then it was the expensive, hand-painted sign in the window. Then it was the street sign which says "Haines Fine Food Market. Our Specialty: European Foods." Finally it was the Sunkist Orange display, which had to be in French only.

"I was boiling. It was the same day they shot the Pope and I called the inspector a fanatic, just like the guy in Rome. He wasn't even a French Canadian. He only came to Montréal two years ago and needed a job when his company moved to Toronto. I didn't like being harassed, especially from this guy. That was too much for me. I said, 'You should be ashamed of yourself.' My wife, who was born in Czechoslovakia of German descent, said, 'This is the beginning.' She had been through this when the Communists took away her father's farm and threw her out of the country. She said, 'This is how it started.' I had enough harassment. I was proud of my sign, it gave me my bread and butter, and I'll be proud to go out with it."

Rather than change his sign, Ribicki sold Haines Fine Foods to a young Korean couple, whose first

obligation under the language law will be to register the shop in French. "It was very hard for us to give up such a wonderful business just because of this harassment. We feel sorry for our people in Westmount." His voice breaks and his face flushes. "After I sold it, when I came back to the store, each time I walked into my cooler my tears were coming down. People were coming, French people, Italian people, people from New York, and they were crying. The mayor of Westmount came personally. He was so sorry but there was nothing he could do."

It is this kind of incident that has given all English Quebecers a sense of being a threatened minority. If once Montréal business was Conservative and for provincial rights, now it is strongly Liberal and centralist, looking to the federal government for protection. As a result, while it lost power in the province, it picked it up in Ottawa. Westmount's member of parliament has often been a cabinet minister, and the political clout of C.M. ("Bud") Drury and Donald Johnston can partially be attributed to their community's role as broker between Québec and English Canada.

Throughout the 1960s young Westmounters – highly educated, bilingual, often trained in both civil and common law, motivated to public service, and programmed to the federal system – moved into Ottawa and the power positions in the privy council office, external affairs, and finance. Michael Pitfield is their prototype and their idol, but he's only one of a legion.

In the end, however, these Westmount boys can do only so much. To serve the vision that had been shaped by their town's unique position and experience in the past twenty years, they had to leave. Soon they became Ottawans, no longer on the front line. They told their friends and relatives that there was nothing they could do; they cited the BNA Act and talked about *raison d'être*. The community felt betrayed, thrown to the wolves.

INSECURITY lies at the heart of Westmount today. It unites great national battles with petty local ones; it underpins conversations about the referendum and about the street-lamps. That's why nothing made Westmount feel more anxious and exposed to the harsh winds than the loss in 1972 of its own police force. A 1979 poll showed that that was the number-one issue in people's minds.

Westmount had been especially proud of its men: polite, vigilant, often local boys who didn't mind taking in the newspapers that accumulated on doorsteps in the summer. But with the integration into the Montreal Urban Community, Westmount was forced into a wider, francophone community. Eventually Westmount Police Station became Station 23, most of the officers spoke French, and nobody felt as safe. In 1980 Westmount countered by setting up the Public Security Unit, a para-police force of fifteen

officers in Westmount uniforms and Westmount cars. Despite the severe restrictions on what a private force may do, no one has complained about the annual cost of half a million dollars. The PSU has given people back a feeling of local control, even though the unit seems to spend most of its time chasing squirrels out of houses on Summit Circle or delivering home small girls who have scraped their chins.

Westmount is a network of alarms, beams, guards, and dogs. Those who have something of value want to protect it and fear it will be taken away. The political threat of Québec nationalism added to the existing threat of vandals and thieves, and so Westmount's citizens, many of whom had striven hard to get there, set up a doubly strong psychological wall around their homes. Westmount became the besieged fortress on the hill; there lurked a raw fear, and everyone had a story to justify it.

In May, 1965, I had just completed my first year at McGill. My father invited me at the last moment to accompany him on a business trip to Vancouver. My mother was left in the house with my older sister, my younger sister, my younger brothers (aged six and two), a nanny, and a maid. At four in the morning, while my mother and sister were talking in the master bedroom, three men entered. They had nylon stockings over their faces and one of them held a gun. When the dachshund barked, they pulled out its toe-nails with a pair of pliers. When my mother tried to dash down the stairs and out the door for help, they caught her and slapped her. For an hour they searched the house for a safe. They demanded money and my mother gave them the dollar in her purse. They put her on the floor and, while one stepped on her head, the others ransacked her cupboards. Then they fled.

We left Westmount after that. We moved to a downtown apartment where Mother could be safe. For my part, I wasn't particularly sorry to go. I was growing out of Westmount. My life had become full of literature, bars, Dylan and the Stones, sex and art. Around me French Canada was an exciting festival of songs, dramas, films, and demonstrations. It absorbed my interest.

Westmount remains a childhood place for me, a small park ringed by ominous stone houses, full of innocence and fear. It's like a toy town with funny people and Lewis Carroll debates. The air will always be a little fresher, and the trees can only grow older. People with power – whether francophones or commissars or the heirs of those there now – will always gravitate up the hill and, once there, will strive to keep Westmount the same. It will always be solid, for it was built to last. It will be forever under siege, as it was in 1690 when Pierre Hurtubise built his basement shelter. And, though its easily frightened citizens may lose confidence and leave, whoever replaces them will look down on Montréal – and on the rest of the world. ~