

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

# DREAM RESURRECTED

*Estérel's past links Château Clique elite with Old World aristocracy*

by Joseph Graham

**T**rains and railways fascinated Edouard-Louis-Joseph Empain. Born in Beloit, Belgium, in 1852, he worked his way through university, but by the time he was 29 years old, he had founded the Empain Bank and he began to indulge his obsession with public transport. Empain built train tracks across France, Belgium and Holland. He also experimented with electric trams, supplying a long list of cities with their first public transit systems. He built the Paris metro, the Cairo transit system and a railway through China. He built a railway in the Belgian Congo and was involved in hydroelectric projects and many other initiatives. For his pleasure, he founded the town of Heliopolis outside Cairo and built a Hindu palace there. His great accomplishments, particularly in the Congo, led King Leopold II of Belgium to recognise him with the title of Baron in 1907.

When he passed away in 1929, he left an estate estimated to be worth six billion French francs to his two sons Jean-Louis Lain Empain and Louis-Jean Lain Empain. Whereas their father was the first Baron Empain, by Belgian rules, they both inherited the title.

Baron Jean-Louis Empain, the elder brother, took over the management of their father's holdings, while Baron Louis-Jean took his inheritance in money and began anew, setting up La Banque Belge pour l'Industrie, and looked for projects. Starting in the Middle East, he sought a totally new environment, one where he could distinguish himself from his brother, and this notion brought him eventually to Canada.

Both brothers also inherited good business practices from their father, and so, when Baron Louis-Jean came to Canada for the first time in 1934, he was already well prepared, and acquainted with the business and power elite. Only 26 years old, he had at his disposal the means to hire the best advisors and to meet the most influential people. He retained the services of

a lawyer named Leon-Mercier Gouin, son of the ex-premier Lomer Gouin, and grandson of Honoré Mercier, a legendary Quebec nationalist who had also been premier. L-M Gouin, who would one day be named to the Senate, was also closely linked with the newly formed Union Nationale party. The Baron immediately set upon the task he had in mind, creating investment companies and establishing a Belgian-Canadian spirit of cooperation, even going so far as to create l'Association Belgique-Canada.

Empain seems to have been guided by a vision of idealism and was called by some the capitalist of the left. In 1935 he created La Belgo-Canadienne de Crédit Ltée, acquiring forestry and mining concerns, and backing philanthropies. He also acquired some



5,000 acres of land in Ste. Marguerite du Lac Masson and began building an ambitious art-deco resort complex there which continues to stand as one of the region's most distinct architectural landmarks.

Empain engaged the best people he could find to plan and build it, including the celebrated Belgian architect Antoine Courtens. To complement his hotel, cinema and shopping centre and give it a fresh identity, he established a post office in 1939, calling it L'Estérel after the Estérel massif in the south of France.

Around that time, the Sulpician Order of Oka, having seriously overextended themselves in the creation of Université de Montréal, appealed to the provincial government to save them from their creditors. Under the guidance of Athanase David, at the time the provincial secretary for education, the government passed a bill through which the university property was merged with the large Sulpician holdings in Oka, and subsequently the merged enterprise sold 3,700 acres of cultivated land and 1,600 acres of forestland in Oka to Baron Louis-Jean Empain. The university was saved and what was once the Sulpician seigneurie became the property of the ambitious Bel-

*Hotel Pointe Bleue, by architect Antoine Courtens, circa 1938-1940. Majella Bureau collection, BANQ-Quebec Archives Centre, D646, P08*

gian. Without displaying bitterness, one of the senior members of the Sulpician Order remarked that the Baron would have some unfinished business to settle with the Mohawks. Soon the Sulpician land was being marketed to Belgian immigrants who wished to establish farms in Oka, and the Baron created support systems to help them.

The remarkable growth and rate of acquisition hit a wall with the beginning of the war. Baron Empain and his new bride, Geneviève Hone of Montreal, were in Belgium when the German army occupied the country. Rumours swirled around the couple in Canada, and he was accused of being a German spy, was said to have been detained and held prisoner by the Canadian authorities and was generally pilloried in the press. The Canadian government went so far as to sequester all of the Baron's Canadian holdings, justifying its actions because, as principal shareholder, he resided in a country under enemy occupation.

Meanwhile, in Belgium, the Baron and his wife organized a charity called Pro Juventute, created to feed and care for needy children. Faced with the risk of imminent invasion, the Belgian government called up all available men, creating an army of 700,000, and the Baron reported for duty. He participated in the heroic "Campaign of 18 Days," a series of battles that slowed the German advance and is considered to have given surprised Allied troops precious extra time to evacuate Dunkirk. He was captured and became a German prisoner, but was soon released, probably because the Germans needed to cultivate good relations with the powerful industrial family.

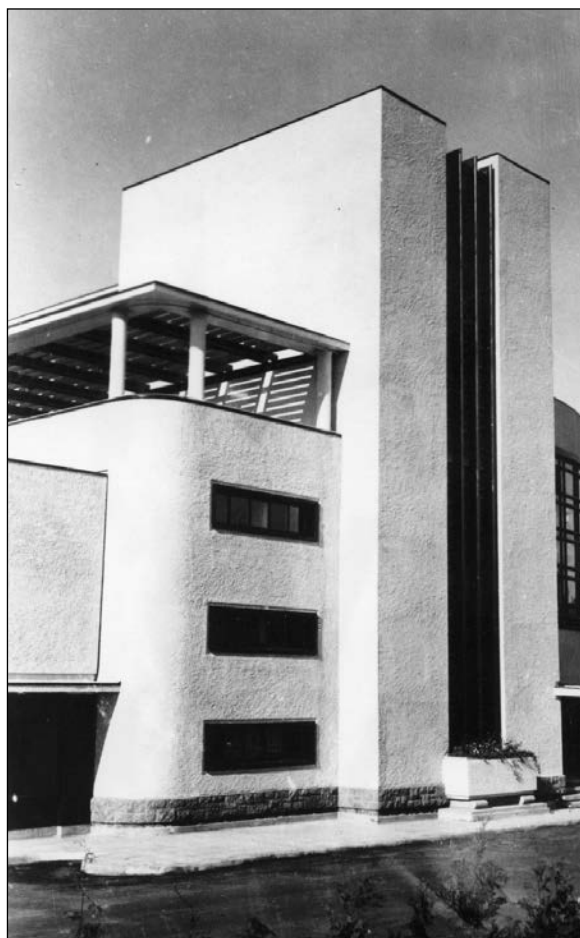
When the war ended, the Baron could not bring himself to forgive the Canadian government for the hardships and the insult of having treated him so badly. Married to a Canadian, volunteering for duty against the enemy, enduring prison and assisting the needy before and during the war period, he felt that the Canadian government would act as his ally. He instructed his managers to sell his Canadian holdings and concentrated on his philanthropy for the balance of his career. His Canadian dreams were left to be fulfilled by others, notably one Fridolin Simard.

One fateful summer day in 1958, Simard was flying over the Laurentians headed from his home in Alma to Montreal. From the window of his small floatplane, the rolling hills of the Laurentians unfolded, their jewel-like lakes twinkling in the sun, but off ahead of him, to the southwest, he was heading into dark thunderclouds piled above the horizon. His radio crackled with a message from the control tower at Dorval warning him and all small planes to change flight plans because the storm was playing havoc with the airport.

Below him, Simard could see a good-sized lake, easy to land on, and his charts told him it was called Lac Masson. As he would later learn, the story of the lake's name began with Joseph Masson, like him a business man who had moved from the countryside to seek his fortune in the city. When Masson arrived in Montreal in 1812, he had no money, but he had apprenticed as a shop clerk in St. Eustache, where he soon proved his worth to Hugh Robertson, eventually becoming a full partner in the Robertson brothers' firm. A visionary and risk-taker, Masson became the purchaser and a partner in the Robertsons' concerns in Glasgow, Scotland, as well. Trading principally in potash and woolsens, Masson encouraged the firm to buy ships, and he was also a co-founder of the Company of Proprietors of the Champlain and St. Lawrence Railroad in 1846.

Masson, like Simard, did not know that French-Canadians were handicapped in business, and

during the difficult period of the 1830s, he was one of the most important businessmen in Lower Canada. He was a member of the Legislative Council, the ruling elite known as the Château Clique, in the stormy 1830s, and while he was sympathetic to the objectives of the Patriotes, his loyalty was to the mercantile class. He eventually became the sole owner of the import-export companies in both Scotland and Montreal when the Robertson brothers retired, and he brought his sons into the business. Joseph Masson, Sons and Company had offices in Montreal, Quebec City and Glasgow with marketing and buying offices in Three Rivers, Liverpool and Toronto. Eventually he acquired the Seigneurie of Terrebonne, and it was his son, Edouard



*Esterel commercial centre, circa 1938-1940. From Majella Bureau collection, BANQ-Quebec Archives Centre, D646, P05*

Masson, who undertook to colonise the area around Lac Masson in the 1860s.

Simard landed safely before the storm and found his way to a dock where he could secure the plane. His business expertise was in asphalt and concrete blocks, pier, bridge and tunnel construction, and his family concern, Simard-Beaudry, had grown out of their hometown offices in Alma to spread across Quebec and Ontario. Taking shelter near the dock, Simard found himself inside an elaborate, abandoned building complex. On one wall, he found a map describing the whole lake with projections for development. He explored further:

**I**n 1864, Edouard Masson had been accorded 1,600 acres for his colony on the lake and even though it was not a seigneurie, he invested heavily to develop it, building both a saw and flour mill. Most of the colonists came from further south in the old Terrebonne seigneurie. The first post office, called Lac Masson, opened in 1868. Its naming served the dual purpose of honouring Edouard Masson and confirming the name of the lake. By 1880, the municipality took its name from the parish mission and the post office and became Ste. Marguerite du Lac Masson. Like many of these Laurentian projects, Masson's small colony experienced difficulties when the bulk of the wood was gone and the farmers had to rely on the thin mountain soil. While the railroad brought some

improvement, it was Baron Empain who identified the lake's real potential in the 1930s.

Among the properties Empain left behind when he returned to Europe at the beginning of the Second World War, was this large art-deco recreation and tourism complex, which had now sat idle for years. Simard looked again at the map on the wall, which showed development plans for 300 houses, a hotel and a cultural centre—but no provision for Empain's absence.

As though the spirit of the place had conspired to grab him out of the sky, Simard learned the property was for sale. Piqued by the ruins of Empain's vision sitting on the pristine lake named for Masson, Simard determined to complete the dreams of both of his predecessors. Acquiring the remaining Empain-Masson holdings, he built a large hotel and golf course and developed the lakefront with expensive country homes. In order to better manage his project, he obtained a separate municipal status, and inspired again by Empain's name for the post office, he called it L'Estérel.

*References: Estérel website; Paul Jeanjot, Biographie Nationale, France; <http://www.bretagne-quebec.com/histoire-qc.htm>; L'arbre généalogique de la famille Empain, Pierre Chartrand, Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Toponymie Québec and others. Special thanks to Sheila Eskenazi.*

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