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## DIONNE QUINTUPLETS: UNSUCCESSFUL EXPERIMENT OF A NOBLE SOCIETY

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The famous Dionne quintuplets: Annette, Emilie, Yvonne, Cecille and Marie were born in Canada on May 28, 1934. The girls became national celebrities, wards of the state in a special hospital-home, studied constantly by doctors and scientists. The paper describes Dionne girls' life story in the context of Anglophone-Francophone tensions and the ever present question: how far can state interfere in the lives of their citizens and when such interference proves to be harmful what kind of compensation measures should be implemented?

Life story of Dionne Quintuplets even now, over seven decades after their birth, reads like a sensation which could make the headlines of tabloid press. Yet, below this superficial layer of sheer sensation life story of the famous five sisters remains tightly knit with certain meanders of Canadian history with Anglophone-Francophone tensions and the ever present question: how far can state interfere in the lives of their citizens and when such interference proves to be harmful what kind of compensation measures should be implemented?

The famous quintuplets: Annette, Emilie, Yvonne, Cecille and Marie Dionne were born on May 28, 1934 on a farm near Callender or, as some sources state, near Corbeil, Northern Ontario, Canada. The chances of having one egg, identical quintuplets are one in 57 million, and so far no other set of identical quintuplets has been born. In 1934 the chances that the children would survive were probably similar, as they were born two months prematurely, so small that they could be held in a human palm and their total weight together was only 6.5 kg. Their mother, whose life was seriously endangered because of high blood pressure and toxemia of pregnancy, was not assisted by a team of well trained, medical staff in a maternity ward of a clinic equipped with all the necessary equipment, incubators in the first place, but by two midwives without any professional training except from personal experience,<sup>1</sup> in a house without running water and electricity, but with a pile of manure in the yard and flies entering freely the room where Mrs. Dionne was in labor. The girls, two of whom had been born before country doctor, Alan Roy Dafoe arrived, were given conditional baptism, wrapped in some tattered pieces of cloth that could be found in the house and put into a basket placed by an open stove to keep warm. They were left under the protection of a fresh graduate from a nursing school, Yvonne Leroux (it was her first confinement case) who for the next two days and

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<sup>1</sup> The first to assist Mrs. Dionne was her aunt Mme Legros, yet not knowing what to do with such a strange case she resorted only to prayer, the second midwife summoned by Oliva Dionne was Mme Labelle, more experienced as she had borne eighteen children herself, and assisted three hundred births. It was Mme Labelle who finally decided that doctor's help would be indispensable (Berton 1997: 37).

nights in succession made sure that the temperature in the room was constant, fed them with drops of warm water from eyedropper and moistured them with olive oil. Only at the first days of June, when the news about quintuplet's birth spread around Canada and the USA thanks to press reports, incubators were delivered (it took a while to find old-fashioned, turn of the century, gas-operated models, which would run in a house without electricity). Also the campaign to deliver breast milk donated by mothers from nearby villages was organized. Against all odds and contrary to medical knowledge, which did not give the babies many chances, miraculously all five girls survived first critical weeks.

The quints' parents, Oliva and Elizire Dionne (at the time of their birth 27 and 25, respectively) not very prosperous farmers as it was the time of Great Depression, yet they had no debts and owned a car. They already had five living children to provide for (the sixth died of pneumonia in his infancy). Contrary to the image popularized by the press in later years and fitting well to the stereotypes of French speaking Canadians, they were not totally uneducated, almost illiterate peasants. Oliva Dionne completed grade nine (only small minority of French Ontarians did so) and could speak both French and English. Elizire Dionne, however, was forced to leave school at the age of 11, after the death of her mother when she had to take up the household duties for her father and five older brothers. Thus she had only the basics of formal education and spoke little English, although she understood it (Dionne Quintuplets, Welch). Definitely at the time of quintuplets' birth their mother was in the state of complete physical exhaustion, while their father was in a state of nervous collapse, shattered with the news that his already large family, for which he was barely able to provide, increased to the number of twelve.

Quints' arrival to this world once again brought back the issue of clash of the priorities and values between French and English Canadians. Already the dispute which place Corbeil or Callender was to be declared as their official birth place points to one of many controversies connected with Dionne sisters' lives as well as tensions between French-speaking and English-speaking communities of Canada. The family farm where the children were born was placed on unregistered territory, close to both Corbeil (French speaking village with the local Roman Catholic parish) and to Callender (predominantly English speaking small town, administrative center for the local people). When the children became world famous both places began claiming right to be called their birth place (Dionne Quintuplets, Welch).

Apart from the formal issue of whether the predominantly English or French community should have the privilege to be called quintuplets' birthplace, girls' birth stirred also hot discussion over the issue of large French-Canadian families, the famous revenge of the cradle, and the fear that French Canadians were having more children in order to eventually outnumber the Anglophones. When the Quints were born, enlarging the number of the children in Dionne family to 10, popular and widely read *Globe and Mail* stated openly: "These latest arrivals will arouse fresh apprehension regarding French-Canadian ascendancy in Northern Ontario" (McLaren 1986: 124). The Anglophones were not so much afraid of being outnumbered, but rather of general decrease of the standard of life.

(...) part of the whole problem is the extraordinary fecundity of the French-Canadians and the suspicion that the French are deliberately trying to outbreed the English, even though in doing so it may involve the lowering of the standard of wages and living and all that depends on such standards (McLaren 1986: 124).

It is difficult to prove that it was a general tendency among all the French-Canadian families. Large sizes of their families were due more to the influence of Roman Catholic Church, lack of knowledge on contraception and the subordinate position of women as well as the fact that in those rural areas large number of children was economically useful on the farms. Also high child mortality rate worked against having small families.

Even though their birth was a great shock for their parents and brought a number of unfavorable comments concerning French-Canadian fertility rates, the quintes became celebrities in the country and world-wide almost from the very moment when their father called the local newspaper and asked whether a birth announcement for five babies would cost as much as for one. A few days after they were born Oliva Dionne got a proposal from Chicago Century of Progress Exposition, a type of world fair, to display the children on a tour as soon as they were healthy enough to survive such trip. After consulting the local priest<sup>2</sup> and family physician, doctor Dafoe, both of whom did not discourage him from taking such a step, he consented, hoping to that the money from the contract would help to provide for the entire family.

When the public was informed about this plan, general outcry about child exploitation started and both parents were condemned for being greedy and cruel, although Elzire Dionne, being a typical, subordinate wife, was not informed about her husband's plan until her signature on a contract with Chicago Century of Progress Exposition was necessary and eventually she refused to sign it. This situation, however, gave the provincial government an excellent excuse to withdraw custody of the five babies from their parents, initially for the period of two years and then until the age of 18 on the basis of Dionne Quintuplets' Guardianship Act which was passed in March 1935. The girls became wards of the state, a special hospital-home was built for their use just across the road from their family farmhouse. Although officially both parents were to have unlimited access to the children, in reality they were made unwelcome and infrequent visitors. It was believed that in the "sterile" environment of the nursery, under the care of professional medical staff and teachers, far from germs, uneducated parents and dirty siblings the babies would grow into model children, paragons of modern educational methods. The girls were studied by doctors and scientists, measured and x-rayed frequently in order to assess their physical development. Their behavior was under constant scrutiny, every sign of fear, anger, sadness was registered and thoroughly studied. Their daily routine was planned on almost a minute to minute basis and hardly any time was ascribed exclusively for the parents, whose visits became sporadic and reminded inspections rather than normal and natural contact with their children.

Ironically, the government soon realized what profits could be made from huge public interest in all the details concerning the children's life so Quintland was opened for visitors, who could watch from an observation gallery as the sisters were playing. Soon the children became the biggest tourist attraction in Canada – even bigger than Niagara Falls, with all the atmosphere of a theme-park, cafeterias, souvenir sale, etc. Between 1936 and 1943 approximately 3 million people visited the place, generating about 51 million dollars of revenue from various quintes' related

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<sup>2</sup> Parish priest of Corbeil, Father Daniel Routhier wanted to build a new parish church and saw great opportunity to gather money for that purpose in the birth of Dionne Quintuplets. Thus the first contract stated that Oliva Dionne will donate 7% of the money for church building fund (Welch 1994).

souvenirs and memorabilia, as the government, being very careful not to be accused of children's exploitation did not charge for the very show and the parking lot nearby (Berton 1997: 99). The girls were also used in advertising campaigns of many popular brands of commercial products and starred in four Hollywood films (*The Country Doctor* and *Reunion* being the most famous). Thus the government used them exactly for the same purpose as their father had wanted to use them, with the only difference that the children were placed on exhibition in their birth place instead of traveling to the USA. It was also claimed that as the show was given institutionalized form, being carefully controlled and well organized, it was undemanding and virtually did not influence girls' life and upbringing.

Soon it turned out that the situation was quite to the contrary, the girls lived in a fishbowl, allowed little privacy, virtually deprived of contacts with their parents, siblings or peers, they did not have much knowledge of the real life in the outside world. The hours of public play were especially trying experience. Although the visitors' gallery was designed in such a way so as the girls would not see crowds passing constantly, yet they could hear the sound of thousands of people passing by. Very quickly the sisters became aware that they were on display. As the quintes were to be models and paragons of modern, scientific upbringing for millions of parents and children both in America and the world, all the nurses and teachers did their best to present the girls in the best possible light, thus their behavior became unnatural, they either behaved like little actresses, posing and acting out "roles" ascribed for them or they were simply becoming wicked, just to show off. Also the fact that they were almost constantly filmed and photographed by specially appointed photographer, Fred Davis, also must have influenced their personalities.

With time the quintets – parents relations were becoming bigger and bigger problem and both parents but especially the mother began to accuse the nurses and other members of Quintland's staff of stealing affection of her own children, alienating them from their mother. Frustrated, she resorted to public arguments with the nurses, whom she generally treated as enemies and she began to threaten the girls trying to make them to show more affection and interest towards her. Quints' father, on the other hand, concentrated on legal battle aiming at regaining full parental control over the girls and preferably reuniting them with the rest of the family under one roof. He was also fighting actively in order to regain control over the money generated by his five identical daughters. Yet, such battle was by no means easy due to prevailing popular attitude that it would be disastrous to return the girls to the ignorant and culturally deprived family. This view was expressed bluntly in one of press articles published in 1938:

As with most primitive people, emotion has triumphed over reason with the Dionnes. Consciously or unconsciously they cannot bear the prospect that their famous children acquiring a culture superior to the six little Dionnes at home. Already they have seen the signs what highly intelligent twig-bending does to children, for the quintes are infinitely prettier and more attractive looking than the other children, and that would still be true if the quintes were put into the same clothes that the six at home wear. They have acquired a certain graciousness and charm as a result of superior association and training" (Berton 1997: 151).

Money issue was also very controversial, and Oliva Dionne's attempts to gain control over the income generated by quintes was seen as nothing else as sheer greed of an ignorant farmer who could not handle the money properly and would squander it as soon as he would get hold of it.

Definitely Oliva Dionne's motives in the struggle to regain control of five daughters were mixed, money being an important issue, as he openly resented the fact that strangers were making money out of his children. "Everyone but me is making money out of my babies" he reportedly said (Berton 1997: 152). Yet, he had some reasons to suspect that funds generated by the quints were mismanaged as the initial costs of maintaining the babies which were eight thousand dollars soared to over seventy thousand in three years, with every officially appointed guardian receiving substantial share in the income.

Apart from financial matters, children's upbringing also became the controversial issue where big clash of values between quintuplets' parents and their guardians was evident. The latter were very much afraid that giving parents more decision-making power would mean exposing quintuplets to very traditional, strict, Catholic upbringing, where children were trained through punishment, repression and fear. As doctor William Blatz, psychologist responsible for children's psychical and emotional development wrote: "It would be a tragic circumstance if an attempt was made to incorporate into their training a rigid discipline of old fashioned obedience and conformity" (Berton 1997: 123). Instead the girls were to be brought up through persuasion and example rather than punishment, encouraged to be outgoing, to explore the world on their own (yet within the clearly defined borders of Quintland) and to ask questions.

Another controversial issue connected with girls' upbringing was the language they should speak as their mother tongue. Dionne Quintuplets' Guardianship Act protected girls' right to be raised as Catholics, but not the right to be raised as French-speaking Canadians. Ontario province custodians preferred them to speak English as their mother tongue, as it was the language of the majority of visitors to Quintland, the Hollywood films, as well as doctor Allan Dafoe, their main physician and for the first few years the person having biggest influence upon decisions concerning quints' upbringing. The parents for obvious reasons (Elzire Dionne barely spoke English) were fighting so as the quints would speak French as their first language. For them, attempts to make the girls primarily English speakers meant that they were cut off from the very roots of their culture, religion and values. The langue issue became hotly debated in 1938, when quints' French-speaking, Catholic teacher and nurse were fired, officially for insubordination, which meant speaking to children in French rather than English. The timing for such a fight was more than proper, as nationalistic feelings among the French Canadians were growing, particularly from 1936, when Union Nationale of Maurice Duplessis won elections in Quebec. Oliva Dionne decided to fight back and asked Association Canadienne-Française d'Education d'Ontario (ACFEO) for support. The association's aim was to fight for the rights of French-speaking, Catholic Canadians, especially the right to be instructed in their own language, by teachers of their own religion. It had strong connections with the only French daily newspaper *Le Droit*, thus Ontario government had good grounds to be afraid that the issue of quints' mother tongue would become another of many grievances between French-speaking and English-speaking Ontarians. With members of the Association acting as mediators in this conflict state appointed guardians and Oliva Dionne managed to reach compromise – French was to be the main language of instruction for the Dionne girls. In the future decisions concerning quints education were to be made by the director of bilingual education of the Ontario Department of Education (Berton 1997: 169).

With French option prevailing English became so much suppressed that the girls had problems with speaking it in their later lives. The biggest language scandal took

place on 11 May 1941, when the Quintuplets were to appear on a live CBS radio Mother's Day broadcast. World War II was raging, England and the Commonwealth nations were among the few still able to fight back against Nazi and Japanese aggression. To boost the morale the Quints were to sing *There'll Always Be an England*. One hour before the broadcast was to begin, the quints refused to speak in English, in spite of all the coaching given to them. The show went on, but in French. Two weeks later during another broadcast, the Quints simply refused to speak in any language. These two incidents, especially the first one, raised a storm in English-speaking Canada as well as in the United States. Without realizing it, the Quints raised far larger issues than just the dispute over with whom, when, and how they should learn and speak English. The hostile reaction to their actions demonstrated once again that, then as now, Canada was divided into at least two solitudes on issues of language and culture. The province of Ontario and other provinces outside Quebec only barely tolerated the presence of the French language, for most Canadians of the 1940s believed that it should be limited to the province of Quebec. Canadian French was still seen as a quaint patois, a 16<sup>th</sup>-century version of continental French spoken by a largely uneducated people. This prevalent attitude was a linguistic version of Lord Durham's notion that French Canadians were a people without a culture, a history or a literature (Dionne Quintuplets, Welch). As those particular incidents took place when Canada was once again divided along language lines over possible conscription into the armed forces likely antagonized people even more.

Together with language debate quintuplets' father was fighting a long custody battle and finally won it in November 1943 and the girls were reunited with the family. It turned out to be a really traumatic experience for them – one of the girls Emily began to have epilepsy fits, probably due to the stress connected with abrupt change of environment. Although the girls lived in luxurious, 20 room mansion with all the innovations of that time which was built from the money from their trust-fund (which remained under the sole guardianship of their father and the girls did not know about its existence) it was very difficult for them to adjust to live with the people for whom they were virtually strangers. They revealed details of all the ghost of their family-experience in 1995 publication of a book entitled *Family Secrets*. According to the story that Cecile, Annette and Yvonne Dionne told to a ghost-story writer Jean Yves Soucy, they had to cope with sexual abuse of their father, mental and physical abuse on the side of their mother as well as resentment and mistreatment of their other siblings (Soucy 1996: 5–30). General situation at home made their later childhood and adolescent years really miserable, apart from the brief moments when they had to pose for family photographs which were to picture a happy model family. They lived at home until the age of 18, when they went to boarding schools and quickly broke off almost all the contacts with other members of the family.

All five girls had great difficulties with adjusting to normal life, did not know the value of money, did not know how to make shopping, organize everyday matters or even use public communication network. Throughout their adolescent years and much of their adult life they also could not get rid of the feeling that everywhere they went everybody was staring at them, even if they went alone, not in a group. In search of their identity, or maybe because they wanted to hide themselves from the public, three of them (Marie, Emily, Ivonne) wanted to become nuns, yet none of them was successful. Marie and Yvonne withdrew, and Emily who really seemed to have vocation died in 1954 at the age of 20, having suffocated during an epileptic

seizure. Nobody actually knew that she was suffering from such a serious illness, as the parents felt that it was a shameful condition which should be made absolutely secret (Berton 1997: 199).

Marie, Cecile and Anette got married very young, yet their marriages did not last very long and all ended up in divorce, probably due to the fact that they were never in their lives treated separate individuals rather than a single entity and formed a closed circle into which nobody else could penetrate (Berton 1997: 211). The fourth of the quintts remained single, trying to find fulfillment in various occupations – she worked as a nurse, sculptor and librarian.

Apart from their parents, whom they blamed ignorance and lack of ability to deal with extraordinary situation of their five identical daughters, they also assigned much of the blame on their unnatural existence in Quintland, described in their earlier autobiography *We Were Five*, which certainly must have contributed in a great degree to their later problems in life: depression, alcohol addiction, marital breakdown and financial problems. They have been fighting for years for financial compensation for exploitation of their image at the first nine years of their existence as well as mismanagement of the trust fund money accumulated at the time when they were wards of the state. Their legal battle came to an end only in March 1998 (the quintts were 64 years of age) when a final settlement was reached between the Quintts' lawyer and the Ontario government giving the three surviving quintuplets as well as the children of their deceased sister Mary, compensation in the amount of 4 million dollars, tax free. Additionally official inquiry into their treatment as wards of the state was promised and Ontario's Premier Mike Harris personally apologized to the women for the mistreatment they suffered from various provincial institutions throughout their lives. The sisters commented their victory in the following words: "This will finally provide us with peace of mind, the peace that comes from being satisfied that justice is finally being carried out" (The Dionne Settlement).

Having their childhood experience in mind Dionne sisters engaged in the matters of welfare and upbringing of other children from multiple births, most famous and dramatic being their appeal published in *Time* in 1997 to the parents of other celebrity children, namely the McCoughney Septuplets:

Our lives have been ruined by the exploitation we suffered at the hands of the government of Ontario, our place of birth. We were displayed as curiosity three times a day for millions of tourists. (...) We sincerely hope a lesson will be learned from examining how our lives were forever altered by our childhood experience. If this letter changes the course of events for these newborns, then perhaps our lives will have served a higher purpose (<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,987457,00>).

The whole truth about family matters and ghost within the Dionne family will probably never be known. It is certain that their fishbowl childhood in Quintland must have contributed greatly to their later life problems. They were victims of unfair dealings of their father, the Ontario government and the officials in charge of their trust fund. When observing their story one cannot also be escape the feeling that at certain points they were unable to escape the role of the victims, and were only too eager to blame others for all their misfortunes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Now only two of the sisters are alive, as Emily died of epileptic seizure in 1954, Marie of blood clot in 1970 and Yvonne of cancer in 2001, <http://archives.cbc.ca> (20.04.2007).

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