"Constant and true in your work and your playing, strive hard and long for the joy of the thing. Fight to the end with your heart in the doing. Up play the game as we learned it at Byng!"

So goes the chorus of “Echoes of Baron Byng” inspired by two English teachers in the 1940’s who perhaps at the time had no inkling it would become an appropriate warcry for a breed of people who in spite of themselves dared to take on the world.

Baron Byng High School, brought out of the confines of St. Urbain street and into international fame as Fletcher’s Field High in the works of Mordecai Richler, really didn’t need a letter of introduction to the world. A list of its more celebrated alumni speaks for itself — NDP leader David Lewis, poets Irving Layton and A.M. Klein, writer and sociologist Lionel Tiger, actress Marilyn Lightstone, member of the Quebec National Assembly Harry Blank, Nobel Prize candidate Dr. Phil Gold, of course Richler himself and a host of lesser knowns who nevertheless left their mark in almost every sphere of human enterprise.

Whether great or small Byngers share a common spirit (Layton compared it to a "marvelous family who probably get along so well because they see each other only every 50 years") that was not limited to one particular year’s graduating class or the school basketball team but to all who at sometime spent their high school days at B.B.H.S. It was a school noted for a fierce competitiveness that earned it a reputation of academic and athletic excellence under the blue and orange.

Harry Blank whose special memory of Byng was “a free flick (a cola drink) and a hot dog for a nickel at Nathan’s” claims much of his success as a politician had its foundation at Baron Byng because of “the competition in the school” during his years there, 1932 to 1941.

A student at the High School of Montreal in the ’40’s recalled how “teachers urged us to get better marks to keep up with Baron Byng”.

Baron Byng is a Protestant school but for most of it’s history the student population was entirely Jewish. All Jewish, as well as the national holidays like

Irving Layton [l.] accepts a citation from Master-of-Ceremonies Harvey Stolar [r]. Ex-Bynger Layton revealed that he never graduated, but was expelled.
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“Where is the desk I carved my initials into?”, wondered one 1952 graduate.

“We’ve come a long way baby”

Alumni returned to find artwork they had completed years ago under the instruction of the late Ann Savage, noted Canadian artist and beloved teacher.

Christmas and Easter were observed.

Situated in a district of Montreal, often referred to as “Balconville” by francophones, in the more easterly inner core of the city, the high school is physically quite unimpressive. A three-storey structure at the sidewalk’s edge, it could easily be mistaken for a warehouse by a stranger passing through St. Urbain or at best, be confused with the local wholesale bakery. Balconies with winding staircases are everpresent on the old triplexes that flank Baron Byng. The bright red and green paint used as a trim by the present tenants stands in sharp contrast to the original dingy grey stone.

These were the homes of the early Jewish settlers in Montreal before they became more prosperous and migrated to better homes further west. As immigrants they looked forward to a better life in the new country and rested their hopes in their children. Although, or probably because, they were engaged in working class jobs themselves, they retained the traditional Jewish emphasis on learning and packed off the kids to Byng. As Layton observed, “We all look better now than we did then”.

It’s not surprising therefore that a grand reunion of Baron Byng graduates from roughly 1940 to 1965 held one Saturday last month attracted almost 1500 to a posh $35 a couple (kosher food $2 extra) dinner-and-dance affair at Montreal’s Hotel Bonaventure and an open house at the school during the day.

Culmination of a year’s planning, the idea was conceived by a young Montreal doctor and former athlete-of-the-year and king of the school, Roman Rosencwaig, class of ’65, who said, “Baron Byng was a place you didn’t mind going to at seven in the morning and leaving at six at night. Extracurricular activities were as important as the academic, everybody participated.

“It made people excel and in excelling take pride in one another... we had a compulsion to be the best at whatever we did. You always had to prove yourself, give a little extra, I guess we were driven to ‘making it’... it was a wild school, a challenge to both students and teachers”.

Rosecwajg received calls about the reunion “right up until the
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time I left home" on the day of the event. Flooded with enquiries months in advance, he answered mail from California, Florida, New York, Toronto, England, and France though most were from Montreal.

Ethnic groups at Baron Byng have changed. About 87% of the present 670 students are of Greek origin, many of the first Canadian-born generation. There are roughly 20 Jewish students still at Byng.

"They have a feeling of the old spirit today or some link with the past because, of partly coming from ethnic backgrounds, they have something in common right away", said Ed Hersy, a graduate of '51.

The present students started preparing for the reunion in January. "The students have been very active, very enthusiastic and are looking forward to their own reunion", said Bob Kouri, principal since 1972. "This is something Baron Byng really needed", summed up one student, the editor-in-chief of the Echo, the school annual.

The high school was built in 1921 at a time when Canada as a nation was still very young and even the native-born population was going through a reconstruction period after World War I. Said a woman who attended Baron Byng during its fledgling year. "the spirit was good then too. Everything was so new it magnified it all the more".

The young school was named after Baron Julian Byng, the current governor-general of Canada, and a much decorated commander-in-chief of the British 3rd Army in the Great War. The very christening of the school set the tone for the strongly British-flavoured, authoritarian atmosphere that pervaded in the school for many years after.

But it was under these Anglo-Saxon teachers, say many ex-students, that a class spirit developed, extracurricular activities flourished, sports championships were won and a record-breaking 941 of a possible 1000 marks in the provincial matriculation exams were tallied up one year. They provided the fuel for the Mr. MacPhersons and Mr. Coldwells of Richler's novels and made Layton a "fabulous teacher." ("I resolved to do exactly the opposite of what my teachers told me to do"). He does, however, "owe his whole career" to one teacher, Amos Saunders who read Tennyson's Ballad of the Revenge with so much feeling that I dashed out to buy my first poetry book. All the others made me feel that to be a poet you were either an Englishman or dead. When I went to school (1925-1929) the students were 100% Jewish but there were no Jewish teachers".

One teacher, George Cameron, who taught math at Baron Byng from 1922 to 1957, described by his old pupils as a "living legend" said. "They had the sense enough to know that to get anywhere they had to do their best in high school which in the earlier years was the only education most would get.

"As time went on more and more wanted to get into university. They were hard workers" Cameron added that, contrary to popular image, he never experienced a serious discipline other than their "liking to talk a lot". He noted however that "some teachers were not so lucky". Those unable, for one reason or another, to keep their crew in
Dr. Roman Rosencwaig (l.), organizer of the grand reunion, accepts the "Athlete of the Year" plaque he won as a student from current Baron Byng principal Robert Kouri.

"Room 41 Boy" Mordecai Richler accepts a plaque from his former composition teacher Frances Katz.

Jewish flavour was in evidence not only in the food, [$2 extra for kosher], but also in the dancing, as circles formed to do the Hora.

line were sometimes the targets of schoolboy (and no doubt, schoolgirl) pranks.

Mr. Briegel, a music teacher associated with Baron Byng for 20 years and who has taught in nearly every school in Montreal said, "At one time the students were very academic. They were studious, good students and many turned out to be big people. They moved to other districts and their children now go to different schools. Now its a new generation which will be just as famous'.

Of the numerous after-hour clubs and societies, the choir and the Christmas concerts led by D.M. Herbert during the 1940's and 50's seemed to stand out in Byngers' minds.

"We would voluntarily, recalls Ed Hersy, a one time member of the choir," in a group, go singing down the middle of the road tying up traffic as we went... choral singing was a unifying factor..."

"Mr. Herbert was a teacher who literally commanded respect for himself from the students".

Remembered also was the Baron Byng Air Cadets under the command of W.E. Jones
"which we thought, quipped Harvey Stoliar, MC of the show at the reunion, "was a vital part of Canada's national defense", ping pong in the basement, the quick games of snooker raked up at the Mount Royal, the cigarettes two for a nickel at Moe's Cigar Store, and the hotdogs turned out by Nathan "The Boss" Rosenbaum.

"Going to Baron Byng was like having a romance. We were more interested in going to school than skipping classes... we had a ball", explained Morty Marks from the class of '50, who with his wife Eleanor played a large part in organizing the reunion.

A lead drummer in the B.B.H.S. Air Cadets and in his own words, "a troublemaker, mischiefmaker, and noisemaker" during his school days, Marks, now a plumbing contractor, observed that "everybody is just ecstatic to see old faces. Old acquaintances and friendships have been renewed. Many are surprised how well the building has been kept".

"They were the best years of my life", chartered accountant Eric Rosner said of the fours
CBC cameramen capture the spirit of the day's activities as the Baron Byng Band plays "Constant and True", the school song.

Master-of-Ceremonies Harvey Stoliar [l.] introduces Nathan "the Boss" Rosenbaum, once-owner of the corner snack bar hang-out. "The Boss" received a standing ovation.

years leading up to his graduation in 1960.
Baron Byng opened at noon with the present school band attempting to play in near gale winds outside the school for television cameras. Inside the old alumni looked over displays of pictures, old yearbooks, and trophies, attended art and science exhibits, paid a dollar to autograph a tablecloth to be embroidered by the current students, bought old Echos for $5, watched The Super Olds, a basketball team composed of former grads whose oldest member was on the school team in 1945 when it won the City Championship, go down to defeat 68-40 at the hands of The Kids or more correctly the present teachers at Baron Byng. A puffing and sweating young phys. ed. teacher had to admit though that the old boys were still "pretty tough". They also saw an auction of 18 plaques and trophies from bygone days bring a total price tag of $200. Two trophies at $25 each and a $12 plaque for best conductor and a $5 one for best
boys choir went to a drapery businessman and a grad of 1960. But mostly they slapped each other on the back and a shook hands with old teachers, sizing each other up after so many years of separation. "We are going back to our roots," said one old student.

That evening they dined on chicken Rougemont and danced under beaded chandeliers to the music of Glen Miller, '40's jazz, '50's rock 'n' roll, and a few Jewish folk songs.

Magician Henry Gordon, class of '36, and hypnotist The Great Pecaré who explained he was really just another Byng boy from 4215 St. Urbain street ("you remember, the place with the long balcony") provided entertainment that wasn't needed by the already high-spirited Byngers.

Plaques were presented to several people they wanted to remember. David Zweig, the teacher with the longest record at Byng who was the only Jewish teacher when he joined the staff in 1943. Dr. Phil Gold, class of '53, for his cancer research at the Montreal General Hospital. Irving Layton, who read "Requiem for A.M. Klein", a poem he wrote on his death two years ago. Nathan "The Boss" Rosenbaum, the weiner Vendor was not forgotten nor Modecai Richler who confessed that through all the changes "fundamentally, he remained a Room 41 boy".

The crowd gave a standing ovation, sang "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" to Dr. Rosenwajg, hummed along as the choir of 1949, Room 31 harmonized through "Echoes of Baron Byng", applauded and hooted as their old teachers were plucked out of the audience and paraded across the stage. For one more time, at least, they were kids again whooping it up on a Saturday night.

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