

In Memoriam – The Honourable Chief Justice Alfred M. Monnin

D A R C Y L . M A C P H E R S O N *

The Honourable Alfred M. Monnin passed away on November 29, 2013 at the age of 93. While the loss of a figure as powerful and as well-known as the former Chief Justice of Manitoba is always sad for those who knew and loved him, the passing also provides the opportunity for those of us left behind to reflect on his effect on the world and to collect the memories that will remain to serve as an example for us all.

While I did not get to know Chief Justice Monnin until quite late in his life, he certainly made an impression. My first encounter with him was at the Laskin Moot, where the trophy for the competition's top oralist was named in his honour. I saw a man who was quite humbled by all the attention, and yet he was happy to engage with the young competitors and congratulate them on the hard work they had done to prepare for the competition. He wanted the focus on the competitors.

Chief Justice Monnin re-entered my consciousness when the editorial staff at the MLJ suggested he was a potential subject for our interview section. It was in this interview,¹ originally conducted in French, that I began to truly understand and appreciate this remarkable man who sat in front of me.

Family man, war veteran, Franco-Manitoban, lawyer, and judge. All of these descriptors are true when applied to Chief Justice Monnin. But, as words without context, they are akin to a great picture that is out of focus. One may have a sense of the subject, but much of the connection is missing.

* Associate Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Manitoba; Co-Editor-in-Chief, Manitoba Law Journal.

¹ L'Honorable juge en chef Alfred M Monnin, "Une Entrevue avec L'Honorable juge en chef Alfred M Monnin" en *Five Decades of Chief Justices of Manitoba* 36:SI Man LJ 75. There is, additionally, an English translation of the interview in the same volume.

But the interview painted (for me at least) the picture of a man deeply connected to the history of his parents and family of origin, and who had deep impacts on his five sons, and his grandchildren, many of whom decided to follow him into law as lawyers and judges. Many of them have partners who have chosen legal careers as well. Chief Justice Monnin lit up when speaking of his grandchildren, and the rest of his family.

But his family is not the only community of which he was proud to be a member. The Chief Justice spoke in glowing terms of many of the lawyers and judges with whom he associated over the years, including Brian Dickson, the man who later became the Chief Justice of Canada. He was proud of his linguistic heritage, and his connections to both the University of Manitoba, and what is now Université Saint-Boniface. He was a proud participant in the life of multiple communities, whether linguistic, professional or geographic. He was a dedicated public servant, who followed respected colleagues into the judiciary, giving more than a third of his life to judicial duty. Yet, he was genuinely surprised and humbled that the Manitoba Law Journal would take an interest in his life and career.

I could keep going, but the reality is this: before this interview, I had met a number of members of the Monnin family (with a positive impression of them all). It was a name sprinkled throughout the Manitoba judiciary. But the common denominator to bind it all together remained a mystery to me. After interviewing the former Chief Justice, I say this: he set an example of commitment to family, community, the law, and the general public. I am honestly grateful for the chance to learn about this genuine gentleman. I will try to put some of his lessons into practice. I hope that others will choose to do the same.

Rest in peace, Chief Justice Monnin. You have left a legacy for your family, and the many communities that you have touched over the course of a lengthy, productive and worthwhile life. While your departure from us leaves a hole to be filled, you would be the first to say that the community will adapt and grow, with a new generation of leaders stepping in. This may be true, but wise leaders learn from those who preceded them, and community leaders will have a fine template if they choose to follow your example.