Voice of the Vanishing Minority has its own rather unusual history in that the McGill doctoral dissertation it is based on was defended in 1971. Twenty-seven years is a long time to wait for the publication of a study that has not changed substantially in the interim, if my memory and notes from the early seventies serve me right. The long delay does not reflect on the quality of the research on Sellar or the writing, for Robert Hill skilfully draws on the complete run of Sellar’s Gleaner, his personal diary and published books, and the memoirs of his son. On the other hand, Hill has apparently not read any of the several useful studies of Quebec’s Catholic Church that have appeared in recent years, and this is reflected in his tendency to follow Sellar in exaggerating its influence and even misinterpreting its motives to some extent.

Indeed, one cannot help but suspect that the timing of this book’s appearance is related to the current militant mood within Montreal’s beleaguered English-speaking community, for the author’s conclusion suggests that he sees Voice of the Vanishing Minority as carrying on in the tradition of Sellar’s own polemical Tragedy of Quebec, first published in 1907. While Sellar would certainly see the Quebec government’s discriminatory language policies as a continuation of the Catholic crusade of his era, the injection of current politics into the book is unfortunate, for it will detract from the credibility of what is generally a fine historical study. Hill may identify too closely with his subject, but he does shed valuable light on the psychology of a man who devoted his life to the losing cause of rural English-speaking Quebec.

The crown and bible that appeared on the masthead of Sellar’s Gleaner, as well as on his headstone, symbolized his unwavering
British imperialism and evangelical Protestantism, but Hill makes a convincing argument that the Scots-born editor cannot simply be dismissed as a reactionary bigot. Sellar was a genuine nineteenth-century liberal, deeply committed to the separation of church and state and never comfortable with the Tory Orange Lodge or the discriminatory Protestant Defence Alliance and Protestant Protective Alliance. Ironically, Sellar’s agrarianism and opposition to imperial federation, including Canadian involvement in the Boer War, paralleled the views of the ultramontane nationalist, Henri Bourassa. In addition, the unbending integrity and uncompromising political stands of these two journalists brought them both, though often on opposite sides, into conflict with the Liberal party that they generally supported throughout their lives.

In the opening chapters, Hill presents an evocative picture of the poverty and devotion to duty that marked Sellar’s early life in a struggling Scots notary’s family. Though he was the second youngest of the nine children, Robert had to drop out of school at the age of twelve in order to help support his mother and three young siblings when his father preceded the family to Toronto in 1854. Upon reunification of the family two years later, Robert began work as an apprentice compositor at George Brown’s Globe. He never met the influential publisher, but he was clearly influenced by his ideas and he also learned practical skills from editor Gordon Brown. Sellar’s financial responsibilities to his mother and sisters increased when his father died in 1860, but the influence of his older brother, who published an Anglican paper in Montreal, gained him the editorship of Huntingdon’s newly-established Gleaner three years later.

Because Huntingdon County, to the southwest of Montreal, had been closed to settlement in the early nineteenth century due to its proximity to the American border, it was largely settled by British immigrants after the Napoleonic Wars. At the time of Sellar’s arrival less than one quarter of the population was French Canadian, and the British loyalism of the majority was only strengthened by the local militia’s engagement with the Patriotes in 1838 and the Fenian invaders in 1870. Smarting from the Conservative government’s choice of French-speaking Beauharnois rather than centrally-located Ormstown to be the seat of the new judicial district, the local elite decided to launch a paper in opposition to Cartier during the 1863 election. Thus, at the tender age of twenty-two Robert Sellar took on the job that would remain his until he turned the paper over to his two sons near the end of his lengthy life. It would not be an easy life, for Sellar’s stubborn devotion to principle alienated many poten-
tial readers and sacrificed the political patronage that most nineteenth-century newspapers depended on.

Sellar lacked the wherewithal to marry and start his own family until he reached the age of forty-five, in 1886. While the much younger Mary Watson remains in the background of this book, it is clear that she was a strong and supportive wife whom Sellar was deeply devoted to. Despite his puritanical rigidity, Sellar was a romantic who wrote poetry and sentimental historical novels which never brought a profit, that is until the plagiarized and retitled *Famine Diary* recently became a best seller in Ireland. Sellar clearly saw his growing family as a refuge from his public battles and financial struggles, and Hill might have referred to the growing literature on family history in order to place his subject’s private life more effectively into its broader historical context. More could also have been made of Sellar’s millenarian tendencies, for his public crusade was probably driven by religious zeal as much as it was by a concern for civil liberties.

Sellar’s outlook was pessimistic and defensive in almost every respect. He fought against Confederation largely because of the threat it posed to Canada East’s English Protestant minority, but he also opposed the extravagant use of public funds to build a railway to the Maritimes and expand westward when his own community remained economically isolated from the marketplace. Sellar certainly believed in the liberal doctrine of progress, which he felt the Catholic Church was impeding, but he tended to resist technological change in his own life. He criticized the automobile for endangering lives by spooking horses, he long refused to pander to the market by changing his newspaper’s traditional format, he was slow to acquire a labour-saving printing press, and he apparently never spoke on the telephone that his sons acquired for the *Gleaner* office. It was strictly in character, then, that during the late 1870s Sellar would take on the arduous task of interviewing members of the pioneer generation in order to write his impressive history of the Chateauguay Valley.

While Sellar was a committed free trader who wanted the state to stay out of the economy, like other nineteenth-century liberals he had no qualms about a strictly state-controlled schools system. One of the most negative consequences of Confederation, in Sellar’s view, was that it resulted in a dual confessional school system in Quebec, for he argued that French- and English-speaking students should attend the same schools and learn each other’s languages. In this respect, he was clearly more progressive than most of the
province’s Protestants, for whom sectarian schools, as well as hospitals and other social institutions, had the advantage of being beyond the reach of a state over which they could exercise little control, at least in non-economic matters.

Sellar’s main claim to fame has always been his crusade to remove the Catholic Church’s state-sanctioned taxing powers from that part of the province granted in English freehold tenure on the grounds that the Quebec Act confined these powers to the seigneurial one. Sellar’s liberal sensibilities were clearly outraged by the tithe, which he viewed as a medieval anachronism, but he was obviously not primarily interested in the economic oppression of Catholic farmers. He convinced himself that the Catholic Church’s programme to introduce French-Canadian settlers into the townships of the province was basically driven by the ability to collect tithes and that without the Church’s encouragement and support French Canadians would not be buying out English Protestant farmers.

While even the Toronto *Globe* dismissed Sellar’s reasoning, Hill cannot bring himself to reject his obviously simplistic analysis. The French-Canadian influx in any given area generally predated organization by the Catholic Church, and, even though the tithe may have given the Church some sense of security, it went directly to support the local curé, and, confined to grain, it seldom provide sufficient income even for that purpose in the livestock-producing Eastern Townships. Indeed, my early work revealed that Catholic missionaries were promoting French-Canadian colonization of the Eastern Townships long before the tithe was legally extended to the region, and that spiritual pressures such as the denial of sacraments remained quite sufficient to bring recalcitrant parishioners into line. More recently, Christine Hudon’s *Prêtres et fidèles dans le diocèse de Saint-Hyacinthe* has shown that the townships she examined were a drain on the Church’s resources, rather than vice versa. One might have expected a dedicated evangelical imperialist such as Sellar to understand the power of religio-nationalist zeal rather than reducing the Catholic Church’s motivation to material self-interest, but he was clearly blinded by his own prejudices and eager to find a simple solution to a complex problem.

Sellar and Quebec’s rural Protestants had a more legitimate complaint concerning the erection of municipalities. The legislation establishing the municipal system in the 1840s stated that the local municipality would conform to parish boundaries in the seigneurial zone and township boundaries elsewhere. When the French-Canadian population began expanding in the 1840s, the parish
structure was simply imposed on the township boundaries, so that Compton Township became Saint-Thomas d’Aquin de Compton, and so on. The problem arose when the Catholic population became large enough to subdivide the parish, for one hundred square miles was too large an area for a single church in the pre-automobile era. Once sanctioned by the provincial government, the new smaller parish legally became the new municipality, with Protestant residents apparently having little or no say in the matter.

In the case of the new parish of Sainte-Barbe, examined in detail by Hill, the original Scots settlers had to contribute to the drainage of an extensive swamp in order to attract more French-Canadian families. This case helps to explain why, when Protestants became a minority in any given area, it wasn’t long before most of them decided to leave. But, even without the Church’s involvement, the people of one part of a township could always petition for division of the municipality for purely secular reasons. A clear understanding of the role played by the Catholic Church in the local political arena must await more research on the sorely-neglected topic of municipal government.

As a champion of the farmer’s interests, Sellar was clearly aware of the economic factors that drove many of them off the land, and in 1905 he travelled to Ottawa where he testified before the Board of Trade that the annual profit of an average hundred-acre farm was only $68, less than 1 percent of its investment. Despite the rich soil of the Chateauguay Valley and the progressive nature of its English-Canadian farmers, one reason they were leaving this region, as well as the Eastern Townships, was presumably to find a better return on their investment and labour elsewhere.

Spurred by a desire to remain within a French-speaking Catholic environment, French Canadians settled the marginal townships well before they began purchasing large numbers of Protestant farms. They were certainly encouraged to do so by the Catholic Church, and even by the provincial government on occasion, but Hill exaggerates the impact of the Colonization Societies Act (1869), which was not confined to Catholics, and the Repatriation Act (1875), which was not focussed on the heart of the Eastern Townships, as he states. As for the famous Guibord case, discussed briefly here, it actually reveals a church on the defensive against the rising state, which forced the burial of an excommunicated printer in a Catholic cemetery. The Catholic Church was more obviously the aggressor in the Oka case, discussed in some detail here, though the subject cries out for further study.
Placing one’s personal biases up front has become academically acceptable in this post-modern era, but *Voice of the Vanishing Minority* would have made a greater contribution to Canadian historical scholarship had the author taken a more objective view of Sellar’s crusade against the Catholic Church. Still, one has to admire a book that so evocatively examines a life and career that does not fit into the triumphal story of urban modernization in this country. The pain caused by the dissolution of Quebec’s English-speaking farming communities is now being felt by families throughout rural and small-town Canada, and there is no political will among the vast majority of Canadians to do much about it. As for English-speaking Montreal, which ignored Sellar’s jeremiads during his lifetime, its current militants run the risk of accelerating the exodus and thereby further diminishing their power base if cultural tensions are exacerbated. But one does not have to accept Robert Sellar’s ideas to admire his dedication to family and community, his refusal to sacrifice principle for financial gain, and his very real talents as a journalist and local historian. By bringing this controversial but neglected character to life, Robert Hill has enriched our understanding of the cultural forces and tensions which have consistently marked this country’s history.