

The Many Misters Trudeau

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COMMENTING ON THE DIFFERENCE between first-rate men and second-rate men, Frank Underhill noted that the first-rate man “is always trying to reveal himself to the public” while the second-rate man “is always trying to hide himself from the public.” Mr. Trudeau, he said, was a first-rate man. His American counterpart, Richard Nixon, was a second-rate man. But both men, he predicted, would fail. Trudeau would fail to reveal his real self while Nixon would fail to hide his real self. Underhill proved eerily prescient. Nixon was exposed for what he was—a thug and a criminal—while Trudeau continues to command our attention and even our fascination. Who was Mr. Trudeau?

For Max and Monique Nemni, he was a callow young man and a crypto corporatist. He was also their friend. And they open the first volume of their proposed two-volume intellectual biography with an anecdote about driving through the snow-clogged streets of Montreal to have lunch with Canada’s longest-serving French-Canadian prime minister at a restaurant on Crescent Street. Over Indian fare they discussed their intention to write his intellectual biography, one that would, in their words “focus on his ideas, his political vision, and how they evolved from his earliest years.” Much to their delight, Trudeau proved agreeable. He even offered to read and make comments on individual chapters as they were written. Respecting the imperative of intellectual autonomy, he quickly added that they could do with the comments what they wished. In other words, their book was their book, not his.

In the end, it didn’t work out this way. The Nemnis reluctantly agreed to edit *Cité Libre* — the reincarnation of the journal that Trudeau had founded in 1950 — and their biography got pushed to the backburner. Then Trudeau died. It is impossible to know if it would have made a difference, had Trudeau been able to read the manuscript. Still, I can’t help but think that theirs would have been a better book had he been able to serve as some kind of midwife.

Briefly, *Young Trudeau* presents a young man who was not only immersed in but subscribed to the clerical, conservative, corporatist nationalism of Quebec in the 1930s and 1940s. It presents a young man who internalized the racial logic of insiders and outsiders, of French-speaking Catholics and everybody else, or, more to the point, of French-speaking Catholics and Jews. It presents a young man who participated in the anti-conscription

politics of the early 1940s. It presents a young man who, however briefly, dreamed of an independent, French-speaking, Catholic nation. Finally, it presents a young man who, when he went to Harvard in 1944, recognized the narrowness, limitations, and failings of his education. The re-education of Trudeau, the Nemnis promise, will be the subject of their second volume.

The Nemnis are unable to contain their shock and, one suspects, their personal disappointment that Trudeau was not someone who rowed against the current, that he was not someone “who enjoyed irritating the other students and their teachers by his conspicuous anti-nationalism.” Insecure in their discovery and not certain how to handle the evidence, they overcompensate in their harsh criticism of Trudeau’s education by the Catholic Church and in their equally harsh assessment of his political activities.

Thus, the Nemnis are at times sarcastic: referring to a series of talks given to Brébeuf students, they write, “Clearly, developing a critical judgment was not on the program that week.” They are at times snide: Father Robert Bernier, a teacher at Brébeuf, is called, not at all kindly, “the good priest.” They are at times censorious: that Trudeau’s anti-Semitic play, written, by the way, when he was 18, “was chosen by Quebec’s most elite to celebrate its tenth anniversary and was a great success speaks volumes. It hardly preached pluralism.” And they are at times reproachful: following their discussion of a 1937 speech Trudeau delivered entitled “The Survival of the French Canadian Nation,” they conclude, “That day, he was certainly not rowing against the current.” Too often the Nemnis rely on argument by exclamation point (“The Jesuits at Brébeuf faulted the extremist Barrès for an excess of moderation!”), argument by italics (“*At the age of twenty-five, Trudeau knows that he is destined to be a statesman.*”), and argument by exclamation point and italics (“*He wrote that in May 1942!*”).

Max and Monique Nemni, *Young Trudeau, 1919-1944: Son of Quebec, Father of Canada*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006, 352 pages

John English, *Citizen of the World: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, 1919-1968*. Toronto: Alfred Knopf, 2006, 576 pages

Ramsay Cook, *The Teeth of Time: Remembering Pierre Elliott Trudeau*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006, 228 pages

Also troubling is the Nemnis occasional use of the absence of evidence to draw conclusions. Speaking of Trudeau's teacher, François Hertel, and his musings about an independent and Catholic "Laurentie," they write, "If one finds no trace of disagreement with Hertel's views in Trudeau's contemporary notes, it can only mean that he shared them." Similarly, the Nemnis conclude that "If the twenty-two year old Trudeau gave no sign in his notes of skepticism when offered such weak arguments [by Lionel Groulx] it could only mean that he, too, wanted to believe in the legitimacy of certain insurrections."

The Nemnis are not wrong about Trudeau. The archival evidence clearly shows that he did not row against the current at Brébeuf and the Université de Montréal, that he misjudged the enormity and moral imperative of the Second World War, and that he was a member of a secret society committed to a revolution in the name of a Catholic, French, and Laurentian nation. In other words, the archival evidence clearly shows that Trudeau was a product of a particular place at a particular time.

The Nemnis, however, fail to recreate that place and time. They fail to immerse themselves in it, to empathize with it and understand it. As a result, their Trudeau had feet of clay. But Trudeau did not have feet of clay. He had the feet of an adolescent and of a young man in a very different Quebec at a very different time. The task of the historian is not, as the Nemnis write, to follow someone's footsteps. It is to walk a mile in someone's shoes and this the Nemnis do not do.

John English, however, does. The Nemnis' crypto corporatist is English's prime minister in the making. He accessed the same archival evidence as the Nemnis, but he is more sophisticated in his handling of it. He read the same letters, notebooks, speeches, and documents, but he is much better at contextualizing them. He consulted the same secondary authorities but he is demonstrably stronger in recreating the Quebec of the 1930s and 1940s. Taken out of a box in the reading room of the National Archives, a document can appear any number of things — shocking, incongruous, bizarre, and sometimes even surreal. But put back into its contexts, it appears, well, normal, predictable, explicable, and sometimes even banal.

Citizen of the World follows a familiar biographical narrative: Trudeau was born into a wealthy Montreal family; his father died when he was just 15; he was educated at Brébeuf College and the Université de Montréal; he studied at Harvard, the École libre des sciences politiques in Paris, and the LSE in London; he traveled through the Middle East, the sub-continent, and Asia; he returned to Montreal where he occupied himself with the labour movement and where he founded *Cité Libre*; he worked briefly in the PCO; he taught at his alma mater, the Université de Montréal; he entered federal politics as a Liberal; he was appointed Minister of Justice; and he succeeded Lester Pearson as Leader of the Liberal Party and Prime Minister of Canada.

But what sets English's biography apart is its incredible

detail, its judicious use of evidence, and its fine writing. With unrestricted access to the Trudeau family papers — carefully preserved and organized by Trudeau and by his mother — English has been able to reconstruct Trudeau's childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and rise to political power. Thus we read about family vacations to Europe and to Old Orchard Beach, Maine, summers at Camp Ahmek in Algonquin Park, trysts with "full-figured" women (whatever full-figured may mean), and his careful, deliberate, steady entry into politics.

Because English selected 1968 — and not 1944 — as his dividing point, his Trudeau changes over time. The corporatist nationalist becomes the committed liberal who valued the separation of church and state and who believed in the primacy of the individual. And because English has written a full biography and not only an intellectual biography, Trudeau's membership, for example, in a secret revolutionary society appears less fantastic when it is placed in the totality of his comings and goings that year. "Trudeau did and said some foolish things," English writes. "Yet perspective is needed. He regarded Les Frères Chausseurs, or LX, as hopelessly disorganized ... and he spent far more time in salons listening to symphonies than in the streets calling for revolution." Indeed, Brian Mulroney — who is, quite clearly, personally haunted by Trudeau — ought to read chapter two, "La Guerre, No Sir!", before he pronounces again on his predecessor's war-time behaviour.

If we take only one thing from John English's biography it should be this: Trudeau was a man. In many ways, he was an ordinary man who, as a product of his place and time, assumed that the 'truths' he was taught were actually true. In other ways, he was an extraordinary man. He was brilliant. He was incredibly self-disciplined (he did not lose his virginity until his late twenties). He was as tough as steel. And he was capable of real change. But he was not a god among men and he did not emerge, *deus ex machina*, in the 1960s to save Canada.

English has avoided the biographer's trap: although he clearly admires his subject, he has avoided reducing historical cause and effect to his subject. This will be a tougher assignment in the second volume. The bias of so much writing about the period from 1968 to 1984 is to make Trudeau the agent of historical change. It is the Great Man thesis of history applied to Canada. It is convenient shorthand to say that Trudeau shaped a generation and that he fathered a new Canada. But Canada made Trudeau. Trudeau did not make Canada. In other words, there were massive historical, tectonic forces in play in the making of Trudeau and the making of Canada: the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, the Other Quiet Revolution in English Canada, the baby boom generation coming into its own, and the OPEC crisis and runaway inflation. In addition, English will have to confront the fact that Trudeau's vision of one nation, two languages, and many cultures did not resonate equally across the country, that the 1975 Anti-Inflation Act (what

labour cleverly called the Wage Measures Act) represented both a staggering act of political cynicism and an attack on the wages of working men and women, that the National Energy Program was one of the biggest public policy disasters in Canadian history, and that the decision not to inform the Quebec delegation that a constitutional deal had been struck was a fateful one.

For his part, Ramsay Cook has written a very different book. *The Teeth of Time* is not a biography — although it contains a lot of biographical information. It is not a history — although it covers a transformative period in Canadian history. And it is not a memoir — although Cook recounts his friendship with Trudeau he does not recount other aspects of his life. Rather it is all three. It is an extended essay on Trudeau, Canadian history, and a friendship that spanned four decades.

Cook first met Trudeau in 1961 when Trudeau was a well-known public intellectual in Quebec and Cook was a junior professor of history at the University of Toronto. Although Trudeau drove a Mercedes-Benz SL roadster and Cook a used Morris Minor, they shared a common, animating conviction: Lord Acton was right when he wrote that nationalism “does not aim at either liberty or prosperity, both of which it sacrifices to the imperative necessity of making the nation the mould and measure of the state.” Out of this shared conviction their friendship grew: Cook translated some of Trudeau’s essays into English; he helped to mobilize support in English Canada for his leadership bid; he laid out, in historical terms, why he should seek the leadership in an “extraordinary, almost unbelievable” evening in a suite at the Royal York Hotel; and he worked briefly as his speech writer in the 1968 election, writing among other things, “The Just Society,” Trudeau’s national unity speech.

Arguably the best part of the book is Cook’s discussion of the October Crisis. As a student of Arthur Lower’s at Queen’s University, he had written his MA thesis on the War Measures Act, World War II, and civil liberties. (One Queen’s University Archives assistant recently told me that, to this day, it remains the most requested thesis.) Cook concluded that the War Measures Act should be replaced by a more limited piece of security legislation and that a Bill of Rights should be passed. Now, like everyone else, he had to watch his friend impose that same War Measures Act. For Cook, it was a tough pill to swallow. While he trusted Mr. Trudeau — he did not then and he does not now believe that Mr. Trudeau acted out of ulterior or sinister motives — he “remained doubtful about the necessity of the action” at the same time as he recognized that the government had no other legislation at its disposal to contain what it perceived to be an apprehended insurrection. To use his own word, Cook was left “ambiguous.”

Meanwhile, Cook’s thesis supervisor and friend was the opposite of ambiguous. Although his commitment to civil liberties and his opposition to the War Measures Act was longstanding, Arthur Lower was resolute in his support

for Trudeau. “A reaction in English Canada seems to be settling in against the Govt’s invocation of strong powers to deal with the Quebec situation,” he explained to his old friend, George Stanley. “The Can. Civ. Liberties Union, for example, meeting in Toronto has condemned the invocation of the War Measures Act, etc. I belong to it, but under the circumstances, I think Trudeau acted rightly. There is no use in being sentimental in such situations, as so many well-intentioned people are.”

Although it really is a moving book — in many ways it reminds me of Donald Creighton’s short ‘portrait’ of Harold Innis, a book written, he said, “under a fresh, deep sense of personal bereavement and loss” — I wish that Cook had examined a pattern in Canadian intellectual life: in working for Trudeau, Cook left the CCF/NDP. Liberalism and the Liberal Party have had an enormous capacity to absorb the left: think of Frank Underhill, Eugene Forsey, and Bob Rae. Trudeau himself had been an early supporter of the labour movement and the CCF/NDP. Was it the weakness of the Canadian left? Was it the cold calculus of power that made men jump ship? Was the national unity debate not only divisive but diversionary? Did our obsession with the constitution keep our best and brightest talking late into the night about Sections 91 and 92 and the possibilities and pitfalls of asymmetrical federalism and, concomitantly, keep them from imagining a different economic and social order?

To help answer these questions, we need the big book: a history of liberalism in Canada that is both the history of an idea and the history of a political party. Wilfrid Laurier’s liberalism was largely shorn of its *Rouge* and Clear Grit radicalism and comfortably reconciled with what Frank Underhill once called “the Great Barbecue.” He took the phrase from an American historian. It meant the great give away of, in this case, Canada’s resources to private business interests. Mackenzie King’s liberalism did not alter this basic fact, but he did reconcile the needs of industry and humanity through a welfare state. Lester Pearson’s liberalism was a more energetic incarnation of King’s liberalism: the Canada Pension Plan and Medicare are the cornerstones of our welfare state. Trudeau’s liberalism confronted the outer economic limits of the welfare state, but it did reconcile the individual, linguistic, and group rights of Canadians in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Is there a new liberalism emerging? That is difficult to say. The challenges to liberalism are many. On the one hand, the challenges are from without: from religious fundamentalism and the flying of planes into buildings; from the war on terror and midnight renditions; and from neo-conservatism and the rolling back of the welfare state. On the other hand, they are from within: liberalism’s compatibility with economic growth and economic inequality must be checked if it is going to be a relevant force in this century. Frank Underhill made this same point sixty years ago. “Liberalism in North America, if it is to mean anything concrete, must mean an attack upon the institutions

and ideas of the business man.” Updated in today’s language, if liberalism is to mean anything concrete it must mean an attack on unchecked growth, consumption, and accumulation. If it is going to contribute to our greatest collective imperative – the imperative to reconcile the needs of the environment with the needs of humanity – it must recover its radical roots. In its twentieth-century clothing, liberalism has confused our wants for our needs. What we need is breathable air. What we want is to be able to live in the suburbs and now exurbs and still commute to work in our SUV. If freedom is not to become just another word for Paris Hilton, liberalism must develop a critical language on the restraining of our appetites.

In his retirement, Trudeau began – however tentatively – to rethink his own liberalism in light of global warming and the persistent disparity between rich and poor. In a 1990 address to Stanford University, he said, “...even in the best of circumstances, our so-called free markets are not always free, and that even though the market has proved to be the main condition for the efficient production and accumulation of the wealth of nations, it can hardly be claimed that its purpose and effect are to ensure that the distribution of that wealth is

either fair or just. Nor can it be held that in our market societies the efficient production of goods and services will guarantee the people’s health or the preservation of their environment, or that the slogan, ‘let the consumer decide’ produces beneficial choices in those who are manipulated by advertising and conditioned by a society dedicated to acquisitiveness.” Liberals – small ‘l’ and capital ‘L’ – could do worse than re-read this speech.

When Mr. Trudeau died in September 2000, Ramsay Cook went numb. Grief and depression followed. Instead of going to the funeral, he and his wife decided – “on the spur of the moment” – to drive to Ottawa to view the casket lying in state. It was the right choice, he said.

I made the same choice. Also on the spur of the moment, my wife and I packed the station wagon, put the baby in her car seat, and drove to Ottawa. There is something about Mr. Trudeau. The attempt to determine what that ‘something’ is will continue indefinitely because, ultimately, it is not about Trudeau at all. It is about us. It is about who we are as individuals and about who we are as Canadians. It is about our past and it is about our future.

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