

Quebec's Anti-Hero

A brilliant short biography captures the pioneer of the independence movement.

JACK MITCHELL

René Lévesque

Daniel Poliquin

Penguin Canada

240 pages, hardcover

ISBN 9780670069194

WE EXTOL PLUTARCH OF CHAERONEA AS the most high minded of biographers. Slender, character driven, readable, his 46 *Parallel Lives* (paired biographies of Greek and Roman heroes) inspire us to embrace virtue and abhor vice. They have made his name immortal, which is all to the good, given that his other works include *On Praising Oneself Inoffensively*, *Whether Land or Sea Animals Are Cleverer* and *Why God Is Slow to Take Revenge*. Plutarch's secret? "The fact is, I'm writing biography, not history."

Alas, our age has reversed this formula; one contemplates uneasily what Gore Vidal called the "Wastebasket School" of all-inclusive 1,000-page biographies; one grieves for one's own life's inadequacy and lack of proper documentation. Meanwhile, for readers, virtue and vice go by the board. Except in Canada. Emphasizing virtue, Penguin's Extraordinary Canadians series is giving us 17 Plutarch-length heroes: Emily Carr, Lester Pearson, Norman Bethune, Big Bear and more to come, all introduced by John Ralston Saul. But one volume stands out, for three reasons. First, it has been nominated for not one but two \$25,000 prizes (the Charles Taylor and the Shaughnessy Cohen). Second, it is about René Lévesque, the lone anti-hero of the series. Third, it is by Daniel Poliquin.

That's a name to shiver at. Poliquin's tract/novel/pamphlet of 2000, *Le roman colonial* (translated as *In the Name of the Father*) attacked Quebec nationalism with a virtuosity and violence reminiscent of Roman satire, especially when the author introduced us to Charles-Olivier Lesieur, a fictional incarnation of the target *indépendantiste* ideology. Throughout that book, the sympathy of a novelist and the mockery of a polemicist went hand in hand. So in picking up *René Lévesque*, one wonders if Plutarchean high-mindedness will in fact prevail.

It does. With a few exceptions, in *René Lévesque* the biographer's passionate engagement serves simply to lend urgency to the narrative. Working quickly (on 219 small pages), Poliquin strips away our fond *Bildungsroman* conventions and treats only the experiences, anecdotes and ideas (especially the ideas) that will determine Lévesque's political and intellectual career. The result is eminently handy, especially for us anglophones: but we

Jack Mitchell is a poet and novelist in Toronto, and one of the LRC's Online Originals editors. Currently composing a tragedy about Louis Riel, he will shortly join the Classics department at Dalhousie University.

relive and assimilate those Quebec-internal forces that brought Lévesque to the podium on referendum night, 1980. Plutarch would approve.

Ah, what a life it was, straight out of the French Revolution. Born 1922, Gaspé bourgeois background. Idyllic ("Sawyer-like") childhood. Bilingual. The Jesuits. War correspondent with the United States Army. Radio career. TV stardom as host of *Point de mire*. Asbestos. Liberal MP. Star Liberal minister in the 1960s. Defeat, exile. Birth of the Parti Québécois (rowdy from the start). Trounced by Bourassa. Newspaper columnist. Trounced by Bourassa again. Trounces Bourassa (1976), becomes premier, revolutionizes Quebec society. Loses referendum (1980). Defeats PQ enemies. Loses constitutional poker game to Trudeau. Decline and resignation (1985). Death (1987). Apotheosis (ongoing).

Into this lattice-work Poliquin weaves accounts of Maurice Duplessis, the Quiet Revolution, contemporary federal-provincial relations, nationalization, separatist radicalism and Lévesque's nine years as premier. His private life (poker and women) remains mostly private. Essentially the themes of *In the Name of the Father* are woven around a single historical individual who is never caricatured and often treated sympathetically.

Poliquin dislikes Lévesque's "talent for [auto-biographical] embellishment" and indicts his opportunism regarding the FLQ, an organization he first abhorred and then ignored in 1970: enraged by Trudeau, "he forgot who the real criminals were." The biographer pokes fun at francophobia and americanophilia ("Lévesque dreamed of Liz Taylor, not Brigitte Bardot") and at Lévesque's fondness for comparing Quebec to, variously, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Palestine, the Thirteen Colonies. By contrast, Poliquin applauds the anti-corruption laws whereby "electoral mores were to be cleansed forever" and deeply admires Lévesque's transformation of Quebec society, including Bill 101: "All his life, René Lévesque had wanted Quebecers to feel confident about themselves; now [with Bill 101] they felt so confident that they no longer felt the urge to separate."

Yet the strongest praise, woven through the book, is for Lévesque's consistent opposition to ethnic nationalism. Here he proves to be "a great artist of democracy." A talented, practised orator, he could equally comfort a crowd of defeated militants and stare them down if they started passing radical resolutions.

At the 1971 convention ... Lévesque put his foot down again: "If the motion [forbidding English-language education] passes, get yourself another leader!" Fearing that the pope would leave their church and turn into a hermit, the party faithful, true to their old Catholic culture, reverted to their submissive mode and voted down the resolution.

The religion metaphor is not Poliquin's favourite, however: he prefers Freud. *In the Name of the Father* developed the thesis that Quebec nationalism is a form of collective castration, a submission to father figures real and historical, while those Oedipal radicals such as Pierre Bourgault and Jacques Parizeau who turn on the Father are soon swept off by Furies. Given the book's satirical verve, it was never clear if Poliquin's theory was serious or just a beautifully elaborated insult, but Lévesque in *René Lévesque* is endowed with a "profoundly adolescent psychology," which accounts for his "juvenile desire to charm an audience" and "adolescent vanity." These one-off diagnoses are extraneous to the story; neither is it clear how the Adolescent can simultaneously be the Father, as Poliquin likewise characterizes Lévesque in relation to the PQ. If labels are required, Aeneas or Brigham Young might do just as well.

Extracts here will have already shown that Poliquin writes depressingly good English prose, even though this is his first book composed in English. He does love picturesque idioms ("chump change," "bossed around," "dressed in civvies"), which can sound odd within his cosmopolitan discourse, but the overall effect is pleasantly international, always clear and frequently inspired: the PQ's decline after 1980 was "a slow-motion harakiri"; "grievance is the indispensable glue of minority identity"; Claude Ryan was "as charismatic as an eggplant." Poliquin has nothing to fear from a comparison with Plutarch's wit.

Speaking of Plutarch, one puts *René Lévesque* down with a sense that a *Parallel Life* is missing: Pierre Trudeau's. Born just three years apart, Trudeau and Lévesque were bilingual, unconventional, charismatic, Jesuit schooled; both were journalists turned politicians with cult followings; both were hell-bent on radical and eerily similar redefinitions of their societies. As Poliquin writes, Lévesque "wanted a Quebec that would be very much like, well, Trudeau's Canada, that is, dynamic and respectful of minorities." So of course "the two were chalk and cheese from the get-go." From their first meeting in a Radio-Canada cafeteria in the 1950s to the 1968 St. Jean Baptiste riot to the 1980 referendum campaign trail, the nation often seemed no more than their fragile tragic stage.

Today, each man's legacy lies in ruins: both Quebec and Canada abhor self-redefinition, and we enjoy congratulating ourselves on our dispassion. Nevertheless, like the Greeks and Romans of Plutarch's day, the more mild-mannered we become the more high-minded the heroes we require. Poliquin's unique fusion of biography, satire and ideas has done justice to one high-minded anti-hero and awaits the next. Even though Nino Ricci was allowed to put the Trudeau rose in his lapel for the Extraordinary Canadians series, Poliquin could be that elusive prime minister's Plutarch, and we would all be the richer for it. [LRC](#)