

Biography and Political Culture in Quebec

B. L. Vigod

Volume 7, numéro 1, autumn 1977

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad7_1rv06

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Vigod, B. L. (1977). Compte rendu de [Biography and Political Culture in Quebec]. *Acadiensis*, 7(1), 141–147.

day Canadians lost two superb scholars and the chance for a complete look at Mackenzie King — a clear look unhampered by apologetic diaries and the establishment's research foundations.

RICHARD WILBUR

Biography and Political Culture in Quebec

Three recent biographies of Quebec political leaders sustain one of Canadian historiography's curious phenomena: French Canadian academics leave the field entirely to others. Although several have seriously investigated the career of a French Canadian political leader, only Andrée Désilets has published a complete study. True, political history in general has recently lost some favour among Canadian historians, English as well as French. But the Quebec phenomenon clearly predates the shift in fashion, and aversion to biography has afflicted even those whose interests are solidly political. Part of the explanation may well be ideological: a prior assumption that French Canadian Prime Ministers, Premiers and "Lieutenants" have ultimately been collaborators in the exploitation of their people by aliens. Even if held only subconsciously, such a belief must severely discourage genuine sympathy for the individual personality, minimize the historical importance of questions about motivation and prejudge the merits of an individual performance. Whatever the reasons, the new works in question point up the desirability of biographical studies by French Canadian scholars. All three make interesting reading and are well researched, but none seems to recognize, let alone confront, interpretive problems peculiar to the political culture of French Canada.

Alastair Sweeny's *George-Etienne Cartier* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1976) attempts to fill an obvious gaping hole in our nineteenth-century political historiography. The first chapter subtitle, "Cartier and his Ontario Lieutenant", accurately signals the approach: to rewrite the Confederation period giving Cartier centre stage. Within limits, it is understandable and acceptable for a biographer to elevate the importance of his subject. But Sweeny goes overboard, assigning Cartier prime agency for every major initiative. In founding the Great Coalition, in the Riel Affair and in the British Columbia negotiations, John A. Macdonald becomes a secondary figure. In these episodes, and in his exceedingly tangled account of the Pacific Scandal, the author's revisionism is merely plausible. Lacking hard evidence, he relies frequently upon a succession of "probablys" "may haves" and "must haves", and reasons from teleological assumptions. In chapters tracing Cartier's early career, similar exercises in historical reconstruction are necessary and welcome. Little was previously known or recorded, and substantial documentation has not survived. Combining a good

knowledge of public events with whatever can be known about Cartier's activities, Sweeny has in fact provided a convincing account of his subject's political *formation*, especially his acceptance of and absorption into the world of railway politics. But for the central and often well-documented events following 1854, novel interpretations require far more impressive evidence. If Cartier was a sincere proponent of Confederation as early as 1858 (p. 118), if Macdonald's expressed preference for legislative union was merely a bluff to help Cartier and Brown sell federation to their respective constituents (p. 144), if Cartier actively conspired with Riel before and after the Red River Rebellion (p. 189), and if Cartier required only time and health to exonerate himself in the Pacific Scandal (pp. 240-1), then several eminent historians will have to revise their work.

This problem of evidence aside, Sweeny seems reluctant to pursue several questions raised by his account. Given Cartier's close relationship with several *Rouge* lawyers, was there really a substantial ideological division between them? On the other side, what was Cartier's role in the growth of clerical influence in politics? Did Cartier's need for political "healers" have anything to do with the discontent of local French Canadian business interests excluded from the grand schemes? Was Cartier an absolute enthusiast for Confederation or was he, as the political leader of French Canada, basically on the defensive between 1864 and 1867? Finally, did the unravelling of the Cartier *bloc* result merely from the illness and death of the master? Or were the tensions which factionalized Quebec Conservatives already beyond one man's ability to control, patronage notwithstanding?

Sweeny's Cartier is a moderate conservative, yet an expansionist urging French Canadian society to look outward, and to participate with confidence in the affairs of all Canada. The obvious though unstated modern parallel is Pierre Trudeau. Equally obvious is the contrast between Cartier's appeal and the philosophy of Maurice Duplessis as portrayed in two recent biographies. Even allowing for the fact that Duplessis was a provincial politician, his career bears witness to the complete failure of Cartier's fond hopes for the Canadian state.

Robert Rumilly's *Maurice Duplessis et son temps*' (2 vols., Montreal, Fides, 1973) is predictable to anyone familiar with the later volumes of his *Histoire de la Province de Québec*. Rumilly is a true believer, especially in the struggle to preserve provincial autonomy. The biography is an undisguised, unquestioning memorial. Despite its excessive length (trivia and repetition consume many of the 1500 pages), Rumilly remains a masterfully clear chronicler. And within a rigidly chronological framework, he offers a far more profound analysis of his adopted society than has appeared in any of his previous work. We have no doubt where Rumilly stands, but he nearly always credits his (and Duplessis') French Canadian opponents with a

coherent point of view and legitimate interests. Unfortunately, his familiar obsessions and prejudices concerning outsiders are also more virulent than ever: the staggering anti-semitism, and the belief in a communist conspiracy against Catholic Quebec.

There are solid contributions to historical knowledge — as one might well have hoped, since Rumilly was the first historian with complete access to Duplessis' correspondence. Early chapters trace the development of Duplessis' formula for political success. He acquired his initial political stronghold by foregoing the superior bearing of most well born Quebec lawyer-politicians: to the workers of Trois-Rivières he was always "Maurice". In the days of Liberal ascendancy, he survived by establishing excellent personal relations with ministers and officials of the Taschereau regime. And he never committed himself on controversial issues. In dealing with the Padlock Law, the Roncarelli affair and several labour confrontations, Rumilly argues that English Canadian charges of "clerical fascism" represented mainly a respectable form of expression for traditional anti-Quebec prejudices. That is moot point, and if French Canadians perceived it that way, it certainly helps to explain Duplessis' rising popularity as the champion of his people. Making good use of the Duplessis papers, Rumilly provides an excellent running account of the fiscal controversies with Ottawa. Regarding the clergy, it becomes clear that the Taschereau and Godbout regimes were not paranoid in suspecting Cardinal Villeneuve, Abbé Gravel and several others of active Conservative and Unioniste partisanship. Far more importantly, Rumilly describes the fundamental ideological division which beset the Quebec Church following World War II and clearly documents Duplessis' alliance with the more powerful conservative faction. In describing the internal workings of the Duplessis Government, Rumilly introduces some plausible modifications to the "one man rule" legend so amusingly fostered by Pierre Laporte. Duplessis thought it was politically essential to associate himself with every important decision, to avoid public divisions in the ranks, and to establish unquestioned personal authority. But he also depended on his ministers' administrative abilities and the expertise of aides, valued political advice, and consulted the cabinet on crucial issues. Finally, and with great emotion, Rumilly defends Duplessis' handling of celebrated labour disputes. In this case, however, the author's refusal to acknowledge the validity of the union leaders' central grievance — that the legal deck was stacked against them — destroys most of the argument.

The major weakness of the biography is simply that Rumilly is too admiring. Duplessis' causes are so self-evidently righteous that there is little need to question either his motives or his ethics. Patronage warrants barely a mention. One strongly suspects, moreover, that Rumilly has substituted some of his own serious convictions for Duplessis' well known wit and irreverence, prac-

tically inventing a new personality. Especially for the period after 1944 (when incidentally, Rumilly became formally attached to the regime), the author consistently accepts the most partisan claims at face value. This failing involves more than individual questions of fact. Union Nationale propaganda from 1952 onwards stressed the “réalisations” of the Duplessis regime, crediting Duplessis with growing material prosperity and equating progress with the “infrastructure” (roads, bridges, schools and hospitals) established with ample provincial revenues. Rumilly and Duplessis may both have preferred to “keep the lid on” in terms of the secularization of social services, the expansion and professionalization of the civil service, and other reforms demanded by the “left”. But the biographer should ask whether this was practical, and whether the attempt to delay reform was ultimately more destructive to social peace and traditional values than a gradual accommodation would have been. In a similar vein, Rumilly might have questioned the long-term wisdom of rhetoric which reinforced the siege mentality of French Canadians. But perhaps that is asking too much, for Rumilly still believes that the centralizing communist enemy really existed.

Superficially, Conrad Black’s *Duplessis* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1977) is a 740 page abridgement of Rumilly. Using similar sources (the Duplessis papers and numerous interviews, some conducted jointly with Rumilly), and seconding the “réalisations” argument, Black echoes the favourable judgement of Duplessis’ performance. He brings much of the same insight and valuable documentation to the attention of Anglophone readers. Inevitably, there are comparative strengths and weaknesses. In Black’s favour are a serious attempt to assess Duplessis’ motivation, the portrayal of a flawed and thus more believable personality, documented illustrations of an absolutely ruthless patronage system in operation and a sensible summation of Duplessis’ electoral appeal. (He might have gone further, however, to suggest why an authoritarian image was so popular.) He is moderately successful as a debunker of certain anti-Duplessis legends, such as the Ungava concessions. On the negative side, Black compounds Rumilly’s penchant for trivia by indulging in lengthy and irrelevant digressions, and his genuinely entertaining turns of phrase (“neo-separatist constitutional Neanderthalism”) do not effectively mask difficulties in organizing a narrative. Understandably, he lacks Rumilly’s command of pre-Duplessis politics, and even of some contemporary developments which did not impinge consistently upon Duplessis. There are also some bewildering inconsistencies, particularly concerning organized labour, cabinet colleagues and the church.¹ Tortured reasoning

1 In the last case, Black portrays Duplessis as a devout Catholic who sincerely wished to preserve the social role of the Church (pp. 577-8, 697). Yet he permitted the Church to become “a dispensing organism, an apparent appendage of the Union Nationale”, as a result of which it “almost squandered [its] religious vocation” (p. 688).

is frequently employed to rescue Duplessis from the weight of damning evidence which the author himself has uncovered. Black reveals, for example, that Duplessis secretly financed a campaign to discredit Mgr. Charbonneau at Rome. Then he absolves Duplessis of responsibility for the Archbishop's ouster by relating, à la Rumilly, that the celebrated visit of two cabinet ministers to the Vatican occurred only after the decision had been taken (pp. 530, 534).

Such anomalies led this reviewer to wonder whether Black's intentions and viewpoint really are that close to Rumilly's. The biographer seems to admire his subject not in spite of the "warts" but precisely *because* Duplessis was a cynical and ruthless politician who demanded and received a most undignified subordination from colleagues, clergy and businessmen.² Black delights in nasty sarcasm when describing both friends and foes of Duplessis. He relishes malicious personal gossip, and imputes petty, selfish motives to everyone who challenged Duplessis' vicious system. Rumilly too chides the pretensions and excesses of the *Le Devoir*-University-Catholic union axis, but he also acknowledges that serious issues were at stake and that some one (given the dismal Liberal performance) had to constitute an opposition. It is almost as if Black regards French Canadians as rambunctious children, with Duplessis the indulgent father. There are several indications of this. It was "fairly routine" for political organizers to "kidnap and brainwash" opponents, holding them in "good-natured captivity" (p. 46). Quebec was a "semi-mature jurisdiction" (p. 218). "Much of [Duplessis'] dictatorship and corruption was really a puckish love of farce" (p. 679). Duplessis' belief that French Canadians required a government "to enforce the spirit of unity" is proven correct by the disorder which followed his death (pp. 303, 632). Other comments about the post 1960 period amount to a longing for the "good old days" (p. 496). The whole package could well seduce a tax-paying English Canadian consumer of the 1970s: small and poorly paid bureaucratic and teaching corps, unions under control and Quebec aspirations compatible with the constitutional status quo. But if he means this seriously, Black qualifies as one of Keith Spicer's "Rhodesians". And his book can be interpreted as a profound insult to French Canada.

Engaging in public controversy with critical reviewers, however, Black has revealed somewhat less destructive intentions. He evidently meant to thumb his nose at Liberal and left wing academics. He elevates Duplessis, whom they abhor, and caricatures their heroes: Père Lévesque, Mgr. Charbonneau, the Catholic Union leadership, *Le Devoir*, *Cité Libre*, etc. We might have guessed, after reading a footnote which dismisses the work of Herbert Quinn, Cameron

2 If Duplessis "didn't find such flattery agreeable" (p. 323), he communicated the preference very poorly (pp. 315, 677).

Nish, René Durocher, Richard Desrosiers, Léandre Bergeron and Ramsay Cook in seven contemptuous lines (p. 733). But when Black later charged that Cook's Liberal partisanship was responsible for the rejection of his Ph.D. thesis (an early version of the Duplessis biography),³ and hurled *ad hominem*s worthy of *le chef* himself at Walter Young, Jacques Monet and others, little was left to the imagination. All of this may seem mildly amusing, but in fact it is deeply regrettable. For Black brought considerable advantages to his project: substantial academic training and guidance (his ultimate fate notwithstanding), access to rich documentary and oral sources, emotional distance from the subject, style and wit. Undoubtedly, he could have assisted serious scholars in their attempts to interpret the Duplessis phenomenon.⁴

Although this review concerns biography, a recent analytical work by Jean-Louis Roy deserves brief recommendation as an antidote to Black's and Rumilly's "réalisations" argument. (The book's overall merits and weaknesses need not be discussed here.) *La Marche des Québécois: le temps des ruptures 1945-1960* (Montreal, Leméac, 1976) assumes that two "réalités irréconciliables" contended for supremacy in postwar Quebec: an urge to confirm traditional social structure and political philosophy and the will "de voir les droits sociaux définis et respectés . . . de moderniser l'Etat et de lui reconnaître un rôle privilégié dans l'organisation et la planification du développement économique et social" (p. 10). It then examines groups and organizations forced by their own particular needs and aspirations to challenge the "old order". Health and social service agencies, trade unions, employer associations, credit, producer and consumer co-operatives, educational boards and institutions and the scientific community are all shown analyzing the condition of their members and clients, formulating appropriate solutions and then seeking the means to implement them. In virtually every case they are frustrated at the final stage by an indifferent, obtuse or positively hostile provincial government. Even where departmental inquiries, legislative committees and royal commissions supported private analysis, delay and evasion resulted.

Roy did not set out to refute Duplessis' admirers; he merely wanted to show that many "revolutionary" political initiatives of the 1960s were in fact a belated recognition of previous advances in social thought.⁵ But he could not have designed a more devastating rebuttal. Within the walls of Duplessis' shiny new school buildings worked underpaid, underqualified and demoralized teachers. While Duplessis guarded provincial autonomy by

3 *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 20 December 1976.

4 See, for example, the December 1971 issue of the *Revue d'Histoire de l'Amérique française*.

5 A companion volume examining the Church and the State is promised, however (pp. 11, 378).

denying statutory funding for universities (they might accept federal grants if assured their provincial money), administrators were unable to plan orderly expansion. While Union Nationale deputies and riding associations dispensed public as well as party funds to the “needy”, professionals could not supply proper care and guidance to troubled youth and the lonely aged. While Duplessis protected workers from their selfish leaders, the trade union movement argued vainly for more enlightened social policies far beyond the workplace. Even when addressing such a sympathetic interest group as the *Association professionnelle des industriels*, Duplessis was banal and refused to discuss the substantive economic questions troubling his audience (pp. 182-3). Hopefully any future biographer of Duplessis will take these contradictions seriously into account.

B. L. VIGOD