THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Separated at birth

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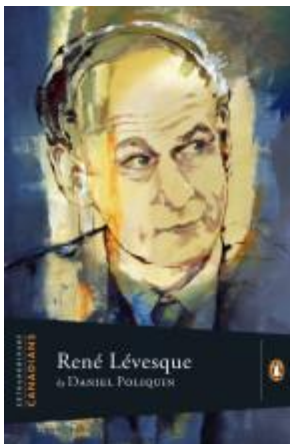
Other people's nationalisms seem silly. American or Canadian, Québécois, Irish, Israeli – national claims to exceptionalism, unique values and special goodness appear dubious to those outside the charmed circle.

In *René Lévesque*, Daniel Poliquin delivers a concise, astringent biography of the late premier and founder of the Parti Québécois, who never quite shook the nationalist bug, although he did not (usually) succumb to its nastier symptoms. It is published in a handsome, compact volume as part of Penguin's Extraordinary Canadians series.

Lévesque was born at Campbellton, N.B. It is tempting, and probably unfair, to see passionate Québécoicité as a response to birth *en dehors de la province*, a case not unlike that of George W. Bush, Texas-talking and New Haven-born.



René Lévesque, by Daniel Poliquin, Penguin Canada, 219 pages, $26

Lévesque grew up in a prosperous family – his father was a lawyer – but in an unprosperous time and place: the Gaspé Peninsula in the 1930s. Poliquin calls it a Tom Sawyer-esque childhood-by-the-sea, but poverty in that region was dire. New Carlisle had a majority Loyalist population and Lévesque received part of his early schooling in English.

Like the separatist Pierre Bourgault, who grew up in the Eastern Townships, and Pierre Trudeau – but unlike almost everyone else in Quebec at the time – Lévesque had the advantage of a bilingual upbringing.

Like Trudeau, he was thereafter educated, or indoctrinated, by the Jesuits. After his father's death in 1937 and his mother's remarriage, the family moved to Quebec City, a town the Gaspésien would always loathe for its inland inwardness.

Like Trudeau, he did his ignoble best to ignore the war – until 1944, when he was expelled from law school at Laval University, and needed a job. Rejected by Radio-Canada, he applied at the Montreal office of the U.S. Armed Forces Network for a job as an announcer and translator, and spent the last months of the war in Europe attached to the U.S. Army and earning an impressive salary. He later claimed that he had joined the U.S. effort because he didn't want to wear Canadian uniform, but the Radio-Canada job would have taken him overseas with “Canada” on his shoulder flashes.

Lévesque often fudged the truth, and Poliquin suggests that there was a profoundly adolescent streak in his character, never outgrown.

After seeing the war, including Dachau, Lévesque disowned the Jesuit brand of conservative French Catholic nationalism but, unlike Trudeau, never intellectually broke free. He remained a nationalist all his life, though a staunchly democratic one.

Poliquin delivers strong opinions about the heroic-victim tendency in French-Canadian nationalism

After following the U.S. Army through vanquished France, Lévesque was immune to that sense of inferiority to France and the French that has crippled Québécois leaders before and since. He became enamoured of the Americans, a sadly unrequited love affair: René loved the jaunty GIs and the vacation beaches of southern Maine, but Americans never really saw his point about the need to break up terrible, repressive Canada.

He became a public figure in Quebec first as a radio journalist, then as one of the province's first television stars, when he used his show, *Point de mire* (*Focal Point*), to educate Quebeckers about the world in language they could understood.

According to Poliquin, a producers strike at Radio-Canada in 1958 was when Lévesque's distrust of the federal project darkened and deepened. The Diefenbaker government's refusal to settle the strike was seen by Lévesque, and others, as a sign of indifference to the cultural life of Quebec, which it probably was.

From the time he was first elected, as a member of the Lesage government in the Quiet Revolution of 1960, Lévesque would be continually be point man on the nationalist patrol, following a strategy where the only way forward was to retreat from Canada. There were successes along the way. As minister of natural resources, he was responsible for the

nationalization of electricity in the province, which had resonance in Quebec, when a people who had historically felt disenfranchised took control of their own resources.

At the same time, Lévesque was helping the Québécois repossess Quebec, Trudeau was insisting that they ought to repossess the entire country: The Québécois were being offered two visions of a promised land. In October, 1968, Lévesque manoeuvred the nationalist parties from right to left into the Parti Québécois, a querulous coalition that no other leader at the time could have created or sustained.

Daniel Poliquin

For Poliquin, Lévesque's response to the October Crisis of 1970 – the FLQ kidnappings, the murder of a cabinet minister and the army on the streets of Montreal – marks a moral nadir. His instincts were humane, and he was a committed democrat, but nationalism is a curious thing. For the rest of his career, Lévesque would attempt to shift responsibility for the crisis to Trudeau, "a political gambit of the vilest sort," according to Poliquin, one the Quebec intellectual elite has bought into ever since. (Lévesque himself was annoyed – disgusted? – when Jacques Rose, a member of the gang that murdered Pierre Laporte, was greeted with hosannas at a PQ convention in 1981.)

Poliquin insists that Lévesque, despite his qualms, was not interested in seeking the truth about the crisis, only in trying to regain political terrain he had lost when 80 per cent of Quebeckers supported the War Measures Act.

Poliquin detects more intellectual dishonesty in the swampy 47-word question the PQ handed the people of Quebec in the referendum of 1980. Said people still managed to return a resounding *non* to sovereignty-association, however woozily presented.

Meanwhile the PQ's good-government legislation and efficient language laws were renewing Quebec within Canada, making the nationalist project seem on the wrong side of history.

Poliquin claims that Lévesque's “descent into hell” began immediately after the 1980 referendum, with the squabbling of various nationalist elements within the Parti Québécois. The 1981 constitutional drama became “the saddest chapter” in Lévesque's political legend. The PQ cynically needed the talks to fail and were outfoxed by Trudeau, who delivered constitutional repatriation and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Then came the hard times of the early eighties, with the PQ on a spending spree just as the rest of the social-democratic universe was beginning to realize that buyouts of dead-end industries like asbestos and textiles were, perhaps, unwise.

Poliquin delivers strong opinions about the heroic-victim tendency in French-Canadian nationalism. If not always sympathetic with his subject, he is judicious. Had Lévesque attached himself to something beyond *chez nous* nationalism he might have become a better leader, but the horse he was riding wasn't going anywhere.

Although his commitment to democracy, and moderation, were deeply Canadian instincts, he refused to believe in the possibility of a renewed Canada, a country that had always irritated him. And the Québécois would not share his dream of an independent Quebec, at least not enough to chance the good life that he – and other restless reformers like Jean Lesage, Robert Bourassa, Gérard Pelletier and Trudeau – had worked so hard to give them.

Peter Behrens is the author of the novel The Law of Dreams.

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