



Nino Ricci on PET

## The many Pierre Trudeaus

Reviewed by Charles Wilkins

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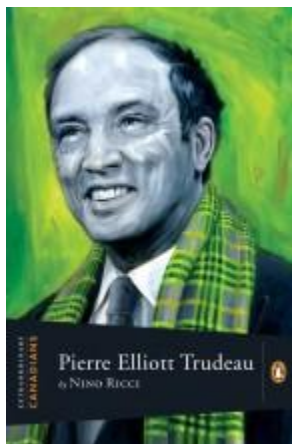
He had all those names: Joseph Philippe Pierre Yves Elliott Trudeau. And in a sense both literal and allegorical (let us say in the sense that the Inuit have so many words for snow, or the Greeks for love), he needed them; there were so many versions of him.

Indeed, the subtext of most writing or commentary about the late prime minister is that no matter what we thought or believed about the man – or thought we believed, or believed we thought – the truth, if one existed, generally lay elsewhere. He was an arrogant man but shy; a peace lover quick into battle; a worldly man who loved the simplicity of the woods; a lady's man who remained a virgin till the age of 28; a consummately urbane and social man who lived with his mother until the age of 40; a man who read widely and adventurously but, until well into midlife, sought the permission of the bishop to read any book not sanctioned by the church.

He was a committed Roman Catholic who believed women should be free to choose abortion; a wealthy and privileged capitalist who was led into politics by a union organizer, who fought for the workers in the famous Quebec Asbestos strike and whose foremost political influence during the 1940s was acclaimed British socialist Harold Laski.

- **Pierre Elliott Trudeau**

, by Nino Ricci, Penguin Canada, 225 pages, \$26



He was a man who loved words and their power but appeared to steal his most resonant phrases from the writing of others. (His timely assertion that the state had no place in the bedrooms of the nation was cribbed without attribution from an editorial in *The Globe and Mail*, while the key rhetorical catchphrase of his early years in office, the Just Society, was plucked from the writings of his mentor F.R. Scott ... or, some say, from Plato.) For some, he was a private and scholarly maverick, reluctant to run for office but conjured into public being by the needs of the country and an adoring media and populace. For others, he was a calculating strategist who, during decades of pertinacious self-grooming, prepared practically and artfully for his historic role.

He was, for each of us, what we wanted him to be – or didn't want him to be – says Nino Ricci, who, with a novelist's flair for the theatrical, has reanimated Trudeau in his entry in Penguin Canada's compact biographies of extraordinary Canadians.

Some of what we perceived Trudeau to be was of course verifiable, and has been both verified and deconstructed by eminent biographers such as John English, Richard Gwyn, Stephen Clarkson and Christina McCall. While Ricci begins and ends his book with absorbing and thoughtful evaluations of Trudeau and what he meant to the country – and indeed to Ricci himself – the novelist-turned-biographer draws extensively and openly on the writings of others in laying down the boilerplate on his subject's early years in politics and, say, the querulous years of the repatriation of the constitution.

Trudeau was loved and hated, vilified and praised. And Ricci deals impressively with the ambiguities

Not that the reconstituted commentary is unworthy; it's simply a little flat compared with those portions of the story in which Ricci's engagement with the life of our most eminent modern prime minister is more personal and heartfelt, or where the story is more gripping, more adaptable to a novelist's instincts. Ricci is at his best, for example, on the building of the Trudeau fortune (gas stations), on Trudeau's relationship with his parents (intermittently slavish), on his years at Brébeuf College (borderline anti-Semitic), his adventures at the radical magazine, *Cité Libre* (seditiously anti-Duplessis), and on his varied friendships and estrangements with, among others, Jean Marchand, Gérard Pelletier, Marc Lalonde and René Lévesque.

Ricci is equally compelling on the kaleidoscopic frenzy of Trudeaumania, the chaos and betrayals of the October Crisis, and on Trudeau's sometimes painful, sometimes aberrational marriage to Margaret. (On the campaign trail in 1974, she referred to Trudeau publicly as “a beautiful guy” who “taught me everything I know about loving.”) Readers with a taste for the tawdry, or mere gossip, will be disappointed to know that there is nothing in the book on Trudeau's relationship with, say, Liona Boyd or, in the later years, with Deborah Coyne, who sat up front at Trudeau's funeral, accompanied by their daughter.

Trudeau was loved and hated, vilified and praised. And Ricci deals impressively with the ambiguities. Beyond this, he makes an admirable and respectful attempt to locate and to reacquaint us with Trudeau's spirit and vulnerability, both political and personal.

Toward the end of the book, Ricci writes: “He re-emerged into public life only twice after his retirement, both times decisively, to slay the Monster of Meech and then the Son of Meech, Charlottetown. But the true monster he would fight, like Beowulf suiting up in old age to fight the unnamed dragon, would be the death of his son, Michel, killed skiing in the Rockies in November, 1998, when an avalanche swept him into Kokanee Lake.”

In both politics and private life, Trudeau was often more vulnerable than might have been perceived. He covered his vulnerabilities confidently and carried on. Never apologize, he once said. As a country, Ricci adroitly points out, we are less likely to do so, or even be inclined to, in the light of having known him.

*Charles Wilkins's memoir, In the Land of Long Fingernails, about a summer spent working in a Toronto cemetery, was named to The Globe and Mail's Top 100 Books for 2008, and was a nominee for the 2009 Stephen Leacock Award.*

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