

An elegant little book about Trudeau

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Pierre Elliott Trudeau

by Nino Ricci

(Penguin, 222 pages, \$26 hardcover)

There was not much that I liked about Pierre Trudeau. His only two political acts that I supported without reservation were his first resignation in 1979 and his second resignation in 1984. I have never been able to understand why people respect him, let alone think that he epitomizes all that is great about Canada.

Nino Ricci's biography in Penguin's Extraordinary Canadians series (edited by John Ralston Saul) has not made me like Trudeau.

It does, however, present a balanced and subtle account of complex and very private man. Canadians who disliked Trudeau, and Canadians who loved him, for the most part didn't know him very well.

Only in the past few years has his youthful involvement in Quebec's quasi-fascist movements during the Second World War or the fact that he was still seeking the Catholic church's approval to read officially proscribed books when he was at graduate school become known. Who would think that the legendary womanizer was still a virgin at 29 or that, even at the age of 40 his resume was virtually empty?

Ricci's novel *The Origin of Species* won the 2008 Governor General's Award for fiction and he is currently the Kitchener Public Library's writer-in-residence.

He argues that Trudeau's image was forged out of isolated events that took on mythic proportions.

Trudeaumania was a transitory phenomenon created by teenage girls ineligible to vote, but it defined Trudeau as charismatic.

The October Crisis formed the image of the nation's saviour in the moment of crisis: Trudeau as hero. And his marriage to Margaret and its unravelling gave us both the loving father and the swinger.

Ricci makes a convincing case that Trudeau's economic policies were a disaster. His governments piled up massive deficits from which the country is still recovering. Politically, he was something of a bore. He had two intertwined obsessions, Quebec and constitutional reform, which he pursued doggedly. If these items weren't on the agenda, he left the politics to others.

Even if you have read Stephen Clarkson and Christina McCall or John English's superb Trudeau biographies, far more substantial and detailed, you will want to read this elegant little book. It provides the best, and best written, perspective on the man there is.

William Christian is a retired University of Guelph professor. His latest book is *Parkin: Canada's Most Famous Forgotten Man (Blue Butterfly)*.