

The hard truth that Quebec's intelligentsia never admit

French-Canadians owe their cultural survival to the Roman Catholic Church; they owe their achievement of approximate economic equality with English-Canadians to Duplessis

by Conrad Black



A just-released book about Maurice Duplessis (the premier of Quebec from 1936-1939 and again from 1944-1959) unintentionally depicts the very prolonged, narcissistic struggle that Quebecois intellectuals are having about the history and vocation of their people. Pierre B. Berthelot has produced "Duplessis est encore en vie" ("Duplessis is Still Alive"). What is still alive is the struggle on the part of Quebec's intellectuals to reconcile the debt French Canada owes for its survival to forces and institutions that it has renounced and cannot accept as having been indispensable to it for centuries. The takeaway is that, finally, the Quebecois intelligentsia offers half a loaf: Duplessis took back direct taxes from Ottawa and established what he called the

“autonomy” of the province, retaining the right of Quebec to choose its political options. Until recently, he was demeaned as an Uncle Tom masquerading as a Quebec nationalist. Though this book purports to be a biography of Duplessis, the reader gets only a very condensed summary of his career. Instead, it includes biographical sketches of his two principal biographers (Robert Rumilly and myself), along with the distinguished filmmaker Denys Arcand, who directed a film partly about Duplessis. Berthelot claims to be assessing the evolution of French-Canadian intellectual opinions of Duplessis, who dominated public life in Quebec for a whole generation, ending with his death in 1959, but we all got Duplessis off our chests 45 years ago.

Rumilly, Arcand and I each get as much biographical attention as Duplessis, for no apparent reason. Arcand’s film, “Québec-Duplessis et Apres,” splices news footage of Duplessis with film of the 1970 election campaign between Jean-Jacques Bertrand, Robert Bourassa and Rene Levesque. Arcand’s film was skilfully assembled and presents the familiar separatist theme that not much changed in Quebec between Duplessis to Bourassa, except the decline of the status of the Roman Catholic Church.

Rumilly was born in Martinique in 1897 and lived in French Indochina and then Paris. He was conscripted from the Sorbonne and hurled into the First World War, during which he was wounded in action. He developed a great admiration for Marshal Petain, his commander at Verdun, joined Action Francaise, an ostensibly Catholic authoritarian group led by Charles Maurras, who was ultimately denounced by consecutive popes as a cynic who was only trying to deploy Catholicism against the communists, and was condemned to life imprisonment after the Liberation in 1944 for excessive collaboration.

On numerous occasions, Berthelot points out similarities between the facts cited by Rumilly and myself, as if there was some theft of sources between us. But he must know that we both gained access to Duplessis’ papers, exclusively in each

language, and that while Rumilly was engaged to write a hagiography by the custodian of the papers, La Societe des Amis de l'Honorable Maurice L. Duplessis, Inc., I was under no such constraints. Rumilly and I made a deal in which he organized interviews for both of us with the old guard of conservative and nationalist Quebec, an astonishing variety of rustic and eccentric characters from 30 and 40 years before, and I did with publishers and editors and the English establishment, and I drove us dozens of times into outlying areas of the province to meet these people. Some similarity of material was inevitable. It was like having a time machine and I enjoyed these excursions immensely. Rumilly had his biases, but he was a real period piece, with the acerbic wit of a bygone France. I had considerable respect for him, but when I cited him once to Pierre Trudeau as a source for something, the then-prime minister threw his hands in the air and shrieked with derision that Rumilly was just "a pasticheur assembling newspaper clippings" – an unjust verdict, but not without some truth.

Berthelot falsely states that my subsequent disagreement with Rumilly arose from my supposedly indiscreet treatment of Duplessis on physical matters that were revealed by the doctor who attended to him when he died in northern Quebec, and in references to his alcoholism prior to becoming a teetotaler in 1943. In fact, Rumilly was aggrieved because I had to quote a few cases where he was referred to as a Duplessist propagandist, and unlike his whitewash of the subject, I pointed out all of Duplessis' less attractive aspects, including his undoubted role in engineering the departure of Joseph Charbonneau as archbishop of Montreal (relying on documents Rumilly also had seen, as well as the recollections of Charbonneau's successor, Paul-Emile Cardinal Leger).

Berthelot shows his hand by implying that by failing to take over most of Quebec's power companies, Duplessis was truckling to utilities owner and bank chairman Sir Herbert Holt, who

responded with loans to Quebec from the Royal Bank and la Banque Provinciale, which he controlled. (This is the usual leftist Quebec simplistic bunk: Quebec was a good borrower and got no special treatment; Holt was an 81-year-old non-executive chairman of the Royal Bank and had nothing to do with la Banque Provinciale.) Right at the end of my section, Bertholet drops the mask and, citing New Brunswick historian Bernard Vigod, said that I have the mind of an "average English Canadian taxpayer of the 1970s" and the attitudes of a "Rhodesian" (Bertholet's very own insight), because I approve of the immense economic progress Quebec made under Duplessis, even though he achieved it by keeping clerical personnel in the schools and hospitals at low salaries and legislating direct improvements to the lot of the working class without indulging the province's labour leaders, attracting investment capital with low taxes and social stability, and using most of the budget to build infrastructure. This, the deceased Vigod concluded for Bertholet, "can be considered a grave insult to French Canada." I don't think so. I didn't vote for Duplessis in seven consecutive elections over 25 years; almost every working-class constituency in Quebec did. Bertholet, for his own account, adds the soft impeachment that I may have liked Duplessis because he was successful. In fact, as George C. Scott said of Gen. George S. Patton after portraying him in the film "Patton," "I rather enjoyed the old gentleman."

What is important is the half the loaf that is still withheld; the historical debt that dare not speak its name. Namely, that French-Canadians owe their cultural survival to the Roman Catholic Church, and owe their achievement of approximate economic equality with English-Canadians to Duplessis and his ability to use the church's underpaid teachers and nurses to reduce his personnel costs and modernize the province; and get the conservatives and nationalists to vote together. No French-Canadian historians have ever articulated that, and that is what rankles with them. The intellectual custodians of the Quebec ethos are still not able to face up to this, but

they admit that Duplessis protected their jurisdiction. Duplessis said: "The Quebec nationalists are a 10-pound fish on a five-pound line; you have to let them out slowly and reel them in slowly." The province's motto is, "I remember" ("Je me souviens"), but they don't, unfortunately; in another 50 years, perhaps.

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