

LIONEL GROULX. — *Mes Mémoires*, Montréal, Fides, tome 2, 1971, 418 p. \$7.00.

In some ways Groulx's second volume of *Mémoires* is a disappointment. He promises much with his opening worries and queries: what was he, a priest, doing directing a secular and combative periodical; how important in fact was *L'Action française* in the life of French Canada? The promise remains unfulfilled. Indeed, Groulx's worry appears to be an *ex post facto* one: none of the contemporary evidence from the 1920's reveals any doubt about Groulx's role in the *Action française*. The uneasiness has come later.

So too has the anxiety to portray the "relevance" of *L'Action française*, less to the 1920's than to the 1950's. For Groulx is writing the memoirs during the first half of the 1950's, a period which produced some rather iconoclastic young students, writers, journalists and trade unionists. Groulx's clerico-nationalism bore the brunt of the iconoclasm. His purpose in this second volume of memoirs is, therefore, to show these young upstarts that the world did not begin with them; that there were thinking and acting individuals of an earlier time concerned with the economic, social, cultural and political survival of French Canada. Unfortunately, Groulx has chosen the blunt, and often tiresome, weapon of quoting himself, in his battle for the survival of his own type of nationalism.

The book, then, recounts at length the activities of Groulx as director of *L'Action française* from 1920 to 1928. It is Groulx's tale alone and, like all memoirs, must be weighed carefully, even skeptically. There are, for example, a number of intriguing omissions. Groulx omits any reference to the French Action Française yet the similarity of names is the first puzzle to anyone approaching the subject. Then too, Groulx avoids revealing much of the internal wrangles of the movement: he glosses over the book shop battle of 1922; he mentions nothing of the administrative chaos of the group culminating (this is recounted) in massive thievery under the very noses of the directors. And Groulx's account of the demise of the Action Française (excepting the Bourassa tale) is much too skimpy given the importance that he attributes to the group.

Three aspects of this book save it from being a mere catalogue of events easily gleaned from a perusal of *L'Action française* itself. The first is Groulx's indomitable spirit: his gentleness, his humour, his mordant artistry, his professorial penchant, his moralizing, his optimism, his faith pervade the pages of these memoirs. Lest such a bundle appear superhuman, Groulx displays other characteristics. He obviously enjoyed, for instance, the notoriety he achieved in those hectic years with the Action Française. Somewhat immodestly he wonders about the great Dollard debate: were the detractors aiming at Groulx rather than at Dollard? Nor does Groulx hesitate to quote the praise, the

appreciation, the gratitude that certain elements of the French Canadian population heaped upon him. In all, a strong and quite likeable personality.

The pen-portraits constitute the second attractive aspect of this book. Who could forget Henri d'Arles the dandified priest in his silken *soutane* and bucklet shoes? Or the irascible Olivar Asselin leaning across the table to query of a gentle-voiced but persistent, priestly interruptor: "You were saying, Madame?" Curiously, the better portraits seem to be of people whom Groulx knew less well. His own close colleagues in the Action Française remain shadowy figures: abbé Perrier, Antonio Perrault and Anatole Vanier are almost too good to be true; the indefatigable Père Archambault and the ebullient Dr. Gauvreau seem to be the only "characters" of the group.

The third aspect of Groulx's memoirs, one destined to keep the historical, and possibly even the legal, community in Canada buzzing for years, is the long intriguing tale of the Papineau-Bourassa family. The story deserves to become a classic in Canadian literature. Whether the account is fact or fancy is almost irrelevant. For the tale represents an extraordinary synthesis on the part of Groulx. He who has always demanded that his compatriots view their problems synthetically has achieved the ultimate within himself. He is historian, psychiatrist, priest, poet, story-teller, popularizer (even *colporteur*), polemicist, untangler and myth-maker all in one. It becomes totally impossible to unravel the synthesis.

The attempt to do so, however, is equally irresistible. Take, for instance, the case of Azélie Papineau-Bourassa, youngest daughter of Louis-Joseph, sister of the mad Lactance, mother of Henri Bourassa. One could probably find thousands of young girls in mid-nineteenth-century French Canada who had talent, beauty, spirit, wit, sharp tongues and determination (brought up in the words of Lactance, to be the *ornament* of the family and of society and to *raise an admirable family* [my italics]) (p. 250), who had experienced some serious illness as young women, who had tried to reform their fathers' ways, who had disappointed their parents in their choice of husbands, who had made the occasional unkind remark to those husbands and who were apprehensive of sex. Would Groulx have all these women mad? Then too, Groulx has relied on a rather suspect source. Azélie's daughter Adine, whom Groulx earlier admitted had a *culte de son père*, left a rather damning memoir of her mother, parts of which pretend to reveal Azélie's character before Adine was even born. In his search for religious scruples in the Papineau-Bourassa family, Groulx has forgotten his own historical scruples.

But Groulx's purpose is other than historical. He is attempting to explain the downfall of the Action Française (when the material might have been used to query French-Canadian society of the latter half of the nineteenth century: what social pressures were exerted on individuals? What was the pattern of

conformity expected? in what ways did religion act as an escape route from those very pressures? how many cases of religious scruple could one find, say, before, during and after Mgr. Bourget's ministry?). That downfall he attributes, in large part, to Bourassa's "waywardness" during the 1920's. Bourassa had been Groulx's ideal *chef*; in the 1920's that *chef* questioned the political views of *L'Action française*, abjectly accepted a Papal lecture denigrating nationalism, and lashed out at a group of Franco-Americans defending a linguistic cause. Bourassa was so loud, so vehement, so accusing where once he had been so exciting, so encouraging, so influential. To abbé Groulx the Action Française movement was so important, a *chef* was so necessary, that he had to find a monumental reason, a grandiose cause to account for the undermining and the petering out of *le réveil*. That reason, that cause — Groulx admits it came to him in 1929, at the height of his hurt and annoyance with Bourassa, his disappointment at the death of *L'Action française*, and possibly even a personal but hidden sense of responsibility for that death — fills almost one quarter of this volume of memoirs.

Ultimately then, the Bourassa tale probably reveals more about Groulx than about Bourassa. That of course is what one hopes for from a memorialist. Thanks to M<sup>me</sup> Juliette Rémillard and to Éditions Fides, Groulx will continue to fascinate students of French Canada.

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