

Max and Monique Nemni, *Young Trudeau: Son of Quebec, Father of Canada, 1919-1944* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006)

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For most Canadians, Pierre Elliott Trudeau looms large as a central figure in later twentieth century Canadian history. Yet portions of Trudeau's life have received much more attention than others. In contrast to his political career on which there seems to be no end of the making of books, his early development as a child and an adolescent has been largely neglected. And although Trudeau continues to command our attention, the most common question remains: "Who was Pierre Elliott Trudeau?" Even though multiple authors have addressed this question, few have successfully defined the younger Trudeau's larger place in Canadian history as John English.¹ Max and Monique Nemni further contribute to the focus on who Trudeau was by looking at his youth from the viewpoint of an intellectual biography.

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The subject of the Nemnis study is the young Trudeau, the model Brebeuf student, the conformist, and the defender of an ethnic and organic Quebec nationalism. This Trudeau, the authors suggest, was far from being the young rebel against authority that past biographers assert. The theme of Trudeau the outsider, the rootless individual who enjoyed irritating the other students and his teachers

¹ John English, *Citizen of the World: The Life of Pierre Elliott Trudeau* (Toronto: Alfred Knopf, 2006).

by his obvious anti-nationalism, and who always rowed against the current, is one with which the authors take issue. On the contrary, they argue, Trudeau, in his youth, thoroughly accepted the lessons and values of his Jesuit educators, and was perfectly integrated into his social environment (p. 310). To explain how and why the young Trudeau is so different from the popular image of his older self, the ardent anti-separatist, the defender of rights, and the advocate for a pan-Canadian nationalism, the Nemnis trace the formation of his intellect and his values between 1919 and 1944, the latter date marking his entrance into Harvard University. For the Nemnis, Trudeau's vision along with his political and social insights did not spring "fully formed from a disembodied intellect," rather they matured over time (p. 11). To follow his intellectual development also casts a light on an important period in the history of Quebec and of Canada. To understand Trudeau is at the same time to "acquire an understanding of the society which fashioned him in his younger years" (p. 4). The Nemnis enable the reader to reevaluate their own image of Trudeau and place it within the wider context of the history of Quebec in the 1930s and 40s. | 486

As the Nemnis point out, young Trudeau's development was facilitated in large part by the lessons and values instilled in him by his Jesuit instructors at the College Jean-de-Brebeuf. The Nemnis are quick to surmise that Trudeau's studies at Brebeuf would be a formative experience of his youth, "one that would mark him for life" (p. 33). They go on to assert that young Trudeau was, in fact, a model student at one of Quebec's elite educational

institutions. But what did it mean to be a model student at Brebeuf? The authors note that as a Jesuit college, Jean-de-Brebeuf inculcated the spirit of the Society of Jesus' founder, Ignatius of Loyola. Jesuit education aimed at forming the whole individual, intellectually, physically, and spiritually. And while the religious formation of the student was given the utmost attention the capital importance of obedience could not be underscored enough. Discipline was even subject to its own section on the students' monthly report cards, a category in which Trudeau often received scores of "perfect" and "very good" (p. 36). |487

For the Nemnis the emphasis the Jesuits placed on the importance of religion and discipline is particularly significant since nationalism and religion together "constituted the combined fundamental values that infused all of the life of the college" (p. 46). That almost all of the students at Brebeuf, including Trudeau, ended up with identical values with respect to Catholicism and French-Canadian nationalism is a telling sign that the rigid discipline and narrow range of instruction at Brebeuf certainly influenced its students (p. 38). The Nemnis assert that not only was Trudeau influenced by his schooling at Brebeuf but, in fact, he fully internalized the teachings of the Church and the values of the Jesuits. The most telling and obvious example being the fact that Trudeau would abide by Rome's Index *librorum prohibitorum*, not only during his years at Brebeuf, but also while he studied law at the Universite de Montreal, and later while studying at Harvard University (p. 52).

The picture that emerges is of an individual who was not only immersed in but subscribed to the clerical, conservative, corporatist nationalism of Quebec in the 1930s and 40s. To be sure, as the authors point out, this was not the post-1960s separatism of the Parti Québécois and the Bloc Québécois. It was the French Canadian nationalism of the first half of the twentieth century as espoused by the likes of Lionel Groulx and oriented around the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, as interpreted by Quebec's elite. In particular, the Nemnis pay close attention to Francis Hertel, a teacher at Brebeuf, as having a significant influence on Trudeau. In 1936 Hertel published *Leur inquiétude* in which he addressed the disquiet of the French-Canadian youths and advanced a nationalist solution to the poor state of French-Canadians in Canada. It was in the French-Canadian youth that Hertel placed his faith. These young people, he said, would build the future and independent Catholic "Laurentie" – the name used at the time to refer to an autonomous Quebec. This priest, who was to have so much influence on the young people of the 1930s, taught them his hope that he would see them found a new French nation (p. 73).

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Without diminishing too much the actual significance of Hertel's work and the influence he had on the French-Canadian youth, it seems problematic for the authors to argue that Hertel had a profound impact upon Trudeau, when in fact there are no notes that would suggest this to be true. The Nemnis write, "If one finds no trace of disagreement with Hertel's views in Trudeau's contemporary notes, it can only mean that he shared them"

(p. 74). On one hand, it seems plausible and likely that Trudeau believed that the French-Canadian people “needed to be saved,” as he had absorbed the nationalist vision communicated by his teachers (p. 74). On the other, the idea of proving conclusions through the absence of evidence is troubling as it allows the authors a license to read perhaps too much into Trudeau’s influences. Certainly, though, with or without Hertel’s lessons in hand, Trudeau found himself an active member of an organization planning a corporatist revolution and an independent Quebec. | 489

A voracious reader, Trudeau read not only Plato, Proust, Duhamel, and the Greek tragedies, but also Jacques Bainville, Robert Brasillach and Charles Maurras, whose corporatist vision was favoured by many Quebecois, including the Church hierarchy. The severity of the depression in the 1930s provoked a reconsideration of the established order in Quebec. And as might be expected, the Catholic clergy led the way in the search for solutions. Priests and bishops agreed that the root causes for Quebec’s social ills lay in Protestant Anglo-Saxon individualism and materialism (p.124). There needed to be a new order and the Jesuit priest, Joseph-Papin Archambault would become its chief herald.

Without explicitly championing the separation of Quebec, Fr. Archambault insisted on a new social order that could be achieved in a Catholic country and a sovereign Quebec (p. 126). The Nemnis contend that this nationalist vision and corporatist model found credence in the papal encyclicals *Rerum novarum* (1891), dealing with the new

relations between capital and labour, and *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), subtitled “On reconstruction of the social order.” Both encyclicals were attempts by the Holy See to come to terms with new industrial societies. The Nemnis demonstrate how the bishops equated corporatism with the advent of a new order – during this era the term “new order” had developed strong associations to fascism (p. 140). That the Church esteemed men like Mussolini, Salazar, and Petain and believed that their own Catholic and corporatist order was well-suited to dictatorial regimes would suggest that the Church was, in fact, sympathetic to fascism. | 490

As good Catholics, French-speaking Quebecers were receptive to the messages coming from the Pope and the Church. For them, what corporatism represented was a defense of Christian values, which seemed preferable to the values of Anglo-Saxon democracy. It is hardly surprising, then, that Trudeau too found himself swept up in a mix of popular sentiment buoyed by nationalist and Catholic convictions that increasingly leaned away from liberal democracy (p. 78). The Nemnis conclude that until 1944, when Trudeau would leave Quebec for Harvard University, this was the predominant ideological and social setting within which he developed his own vision (p. 151). It was a setting in which he had routinely been told that liberalism and democracy were at the root of social disruption, that French Canadian nationalism under the supervision of the Church could create a new order in an independent Quebec, and that it was left to the French-Canadian youth to carry out this vision. By 1944, though, the Nemnis argue that

Trudeau recognized the enormous failings of his education and discovered a new way of acting through reform rather than revolution (p. 306). But what moved him to abandon his corporatist vision and his goal of an independent Quebec? What became of his early search for the True and Good? These questions will be the subject of the second volume of the Nemnis biography.

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Compared to other biographies of Trudeau, most notably John English's *Citizen of the World*, the Nemnis's account of Trudeau is limited not just because it is a strictly intellectual biography of his early years. Rather the real reason lies in the propensity of the authors to overdramatize both his influences, as seen with Hertel, and his actions, in particular his involvement in a secret revolutionary society that sought to create an independent Quebec. Because John English writes a full biography and not an intellectual one, Trudeau's participation in a secret society, for example, appears less incredible when it is placed in the context of his comings and goings of his year. English writes that "Trudeau did and said some foolish things...he spent far more time in salons listening to symphonies than in the streets calling for revolution."²

This objection aside, the Nemnis have made a valuable contribution to our understanding of Canadian political culture. Few authors who have addressed this subject have worked through Trudeau's personal papers and extracted a narrative that requires the reader to understand the society which fashioned him in his younger

² *Ibid.*, 101.

years. The evidence suggests that Trudeau was a product of a particular place and time when attempts were made to awaken the collective consciousness of French-Canadians, the reverberations of which sound in past and current proposals for Quebec's economic and political independence. Not only do the Nemnis demonstrate how the political culture of Quebec in the 1930s and 1940s had an effect on Trudeau, but they do so with diligence and grace, ever so mindful of the fact that, indeed, Trudeau was a son of Quebec. |492