

## Mulroney — he's done it his way

Brian Mulroney. *Memoirs*. Toronto, a Douglas Gibson Book, McClelland & Stewart, 2007

Review by Anthony Wilson-Smith



Before the publication of Brian Mulroney's memoirs, there was one sure bet: whatever he wrote — and whatever he left out — would tick off someone. If he took the magnanimous approach many self-biographers favour — reaching for their place in history by glossing over controversial incidents and people — he would be forsaking his partisan nature. If he claimed credit for too much, he would be vain-glorious. If he tried to be statesmanlike, he would be over-reaching. If he stuck to what is already known about his life and achievements, he would be boring. And if he told his own version of his remarkable, sometimes vainglorious, often controversial, never-boring and unquestionably over-achieving life... well, there's surely a reason they haven't written stories like that since Horatio Alger days, isn't there?

Thankfully for all — and that includes both his many friends and unforgiving enemies — Brian Mulroney's *Memoirs* is completely true to its larger-than-life author, the bearer of an epic life filled with triumph, tragedy, redemption, in-your-face insults and paybacks, your basic rags-to-riches-rise — and an astonishing strength of will and vision that is, in the end, his most enduring quality.

In many ways, Mulroney's story — the smalltown Quebec Irishman made good — is like a 19<sup>th</sup>-century tale told to a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Canada defined by its bulging, multicultural urban centres and shrinking rural population. (To this day, you can still make the case that

Mulroney feels far more at home in, say, Manhattan than he does in Toronto, and that Montreal is the only city in Canada in which he feels completely at home: witness the fact that his book launch in Montreal was a mob scene of more than 1,000 people from all walks of life, while his Toronto event the following night was a carefully chosen gathering of 400 of the city's business and social elite.) That's what makes even more remarkable the fact that Mulroney, as much as anyone, is responsible for some of the most important elements of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Canada — its taxation policy, its openness to free trade, and the fact that it is now virtually a given that any party that harbours serious wishes of holding power federally will accept those policies along with a general openness to official bilingualism and a generous immigration policy.

But the real challenge in dissecting Mulroney's *Memoirs* is that it isn't just about how he's lived his life: it's also about how well or poorly he's succeeded in describing it. Cynics — and that includes most journalists — usually ask three questions when a politician's memoirs appear. The first is how much the politician has actually written without benefit of ghostwriter (Jean Chrétien's previous and about-to-be-updated memoirs, for example, were for the most part written, uncredited, by Ron Graham). The second question concerns how much the author has chosen to judiciously leave out — say, for example, a failed first marriage dismissed in a couple of sen-

tences; the inevitable defeats described as moral victories or character-builders. And the third issue is the relentless determination to rewrite history in a fashion most flattering to his — or her — self. (Think here, in terms of all of most or all of the above, of Bill Clinton's equally mammoth *My Life*.)

Mulroney's *Memoirs* is relentlessly, unapologetically, original on almost every count. Most importantly, it's clear from the moment you open the book — pages of Mulroney's handwritten manuscript are reproduced within — that this is his voice, unfiltered: no one else mixes sentiments of the most profound and profane variety with such ease and enthusiasm. What's also quickly apparent is that Mulroney has probably killed off any chance for a future biography by others in search of the "untold story" of Canada's 18<sup>th</sup> prime minister: at 1,054 pages, there's not a lot he has chosen to leave out. To his credit, that includes his challenges, defeats and less-than-shining moments: his frank description of his ultimately successful fight against excessive drinking ("As I thought about the marriage and lives I was increasingly placing in jeopardy, I felt weak and ashamed"). There are his teary moments as the Meech Accord disintegrated and he thought the country was about to be broken under his watch; the bitterness that dominated his life after his defeat at the 1976 Progressive Conservative leadership convention; his seething resentment toward political opponents he once admired who he feels wronged him for their own selfish ends — most notably

Pierre Trudeau and Lucien Bouchard.

In the run-up to the book's release — including television interviews and the release of selected excerpts — his comments about Trudeau and Bouchard achieved the extraordinary feat of annoying ardent federalists and sovereigntists all at the same time — for different reasons. For the anti-Meech crowd, Trudeau's opposition has always been seen as the act of a high-minded philosopher who feared the slow decay of Canada more than anything else; in Quebec, Bouchard's repudiation of Meech and federalism has been portrayed in much the same way in terms of the province he then said he wanted to make a country. For Mulroney, both men were opportunists who betrayed principles they held dear.

No matter which side you sit on, the news coverage of Mulroney's comments had a self-serving, unpleasantly pious edge. Trudeau deserves more than long references to his misbegotten teenage years of protesting the Second World War and driving a motorcycle while wearing a German helmet: he learned from his foolishness. And anyone who actually lived the 1980 referendum on the federalist side is likely to take exception to Mulroney's assertion that the effect of Trudeau's speeches was over-rated. Trudeau brought precisely the passion and eloquence to the debate that the federalist forces had been lacking. As for Bouchard, Mulroney — still understandably shattered by the *volte face* of his longtime best friend — seems too inclined to believe the assertions of Jacques Parizeau's biographer Pierre Duchesne that Bouchard planned his defection well in advance — even though Bouchard has himself written otherwise. When you look at the continuing ambivalence Bouchard displays between sovereignty and federalism, it seems more likely that Bouchard continues to nurse his own doubts and emotional pain about the split.

But those references also bring to mind two other important issues

too easily swept aside. Here's the first: should someone writing their memoirs take the high road — or the real one? Would Mulroney have earned any points by sidestepping either issue or by praising Bouchard or Trudeau when it has been so clear for so long where his real feelings lie? (It's been gospel among Mulroney friends for years that he has left instructions that Bouchard should not be allowed to attend his funeral. Now, Mulroney has said so publicly.) Give him points for truth even if you don't like the sentiments.

The second issue is this: book excerpts invariably capture the most headline-worthy moments, but — and in my previous life as an editor, I routinely, unapologetically sought this — they're much more about providing the most shocking quotes and greatest hits than seeking a balanced portrayal of the full story. When it comes to partisan politics, Mulroney — who may be horrified by this description — is actually quite generous in his willingness to compliment and give credit to opponents. Based on excerpts alone, you'd presume that Trudeau and Bouchard are both dark knights in whom not a single redeeming quality can be found. But Mulroney is on occasion lavish in his praise and the way in which he recounts specific anecdotes involving both men in the years prior to their differences. His description of the way in which Trudeau welcomed him into the House of Commons in 1983 after a by-election win is warm and respectful; so is the way he describes their efforts together on a Manitoba bilingualism debate in which each rose beyond partisan politics. And the numerous references to Bouchard prior to their split over Meech demonstrate Bouchard's eloquence, humour, intelligence and charisma (though he also notes that Mila told him that despite the two men's closeness for so long, she never trusted him.) He is also very specific in his praise of some of those who opposed him both in and outside of his own

party, ranging from Joe Clark to Tommy Douglas and Svend Robinson of the NDP to a surprisingly large number of Liberals.

There are two other striking points of reference about this book and the man who fills it. For someone so often described as boastful, he chooses not to mention one of his greatest qualities: his unfailing and determinedly unpublicized personal kindnesses toward friends and acquaintances in need. Anyone who knows Mulroney at all — and I'd be at the outer periphery of his vast circle — knows many tales of how he has reached out to people in need with phone calls, favours and other gestures never forgotten. You read about little or none of that here. And fourteen years after he left office, the people who fill this book — starting with the author — continue to have a huge impact in Canadian and international circles at all levels — ranging from Mulroney's countless international boards and allies to the presence of Michael Wilson as our ambassador in Washington, the ever-influential Derek Burney in things both corporate and political, Jean Charest in Quebec, John Tory as head of the Ontario Conservatives, and corporate heavyweights like Bill Fox, Luc Lavoie and Stanley Hartt.

If Mulroney wrote this book with an eye to his place in history, it's too early: he's neither gone nor forgotten. But that's another element of what makes it so fascinating: what might have been dry history is filled with characters and achievements that continue to define us in ways we still debate. And as for the book's always compelling and — to some — controversial author — he proves once again that whether he's living his life or simply recounting it, he has, more than anything else, been true to one principle: he did it his way.

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