

FLQ postscript

Quebec journalist details history of violent independence faction active since the late 1950s

York history professor Ramsay Cook examines extensively-researched new book on the historical impact of the FLQ and its forerunner, the RIN

By RAMSAY COOK

FLQ The Anatomy of an Underground Movement by Louis Fournier; trans. Edward Baxter NC Press, Toronto, 1984 373 pp., \$XX.XX

Last May Nathalie Petrowski, an enterprising reporter for the Montreal daily *Le Devoir*, set out to discover what had happened to the famous "militants" of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Those who shouted "québec aux Québécois", rioted at the 1968 St. Jean Baptiste celebrations to show their displeasure at the presence for the Canadian prime minister, read Franz Fanon's *les damnés de la terre*, learned how to make and explode bombs and, in October 1970, created an international incident by kidnapping a British diplomat and, finally, brutally murdering a Quebec cabinet minister. She found some of them, though they were not readily recognizable.

First there was Gérard Pelletier, now 31, once condemned to seven years in prison for his part in a bank robbery carried out to finance FLQ activities; now wearing a three-piece suit, employed as a marketing consultant and a member of the Outremont municipal council. (The mayor of Outremont is none other than Jerome Choquette, the Quebec minister of Justice when Pelletier was arrested during the October crisis.) Pelletier's view of his past: "There are too many people broken by the stupid and idiotic history of militancy. It was not an ideal, it was an ideology founded on nothing . . ."

Then there is Jacques Lanctôt who dragged James Cross from his house that October 5 morning, the event that marked the beginning of the end for the FLQ. Today Lanctôt is an editor having concluded that "to work on culture, that is the real politics." His younger sis-

ter, Louise, now 37, was one of Cross's guardians during his 59 day imprisonment. Now she is a clerk at the University of Montreal, returned after years in exile in Cuba and France, convinced that "militantism is a false view of reality."

Pierre-Paul Geoffrey was a political science student and RIN activist when he joined the FLQ. Eventually he was convicted of 31 bombings for which he earned 12 years in jail. He now works in an art gallery, trying to understand his past. "Those who spent seventeen hours a day working for the cause, now spend seventeen hours a day thinking of other things," he remarked. "One searches oneself." The ideologues who spurred the others on with mouth filling rhetoric—and spent some years in jail—have also changed. Charles Gagnon, while still thinking about revolution, is looking for a professorship. Pierre Vallières, author of the best selling *White Niggers of America* and hero of the radical chic, today suffers from arteriosclerosis, works for gay liberation, tends his garden and reads the works of Buddha.

These are the fruits of those exciting, violent years of struggle and shouting "we shall overcome," the words of Martin Luther King, but hardly the spirit. "Pierre Paul Geoffrey lost twenty years of his life," Nathalie Petrowski concluded. "He has no trade, no diploma. The projects of the PQ and the Socialist party leave him cold. At the moment he thinks ironically about subsidies that he could obtain from the federal government under the federal employment creation programme. Pierre-Paul Geoffrey searches."

These are lives that should be kept in mind when reading Louis Fournier's recently translated *FLQ The Anatomy of an Underground Movement*. Here the Geoffrey's, Lanctôts, Vallières, Larue-Langlois, Lemieux, Roses, Schirms, Hudon, "Salim" and "Salem," two young Quebecers trained in a Palestinian Fedayin camp, are depicted in their days of glory—when they set off bombs, organized demonstrations and holdups, terrorized a significant proportion of the population of Quebec and dreamed of an independent, revolutionary socialist Quebec. "Où sont les neiges d'antan?" Fournier, who was himself on the fringes of the militant activists in the late '60s—a student radical, and then journalist. Together with Gerald Godin and others he contributed to one of those scabrous left wing works of character assassination which so often passed for argument in the late '60s. (It was called *dossiers de québec-presse* and purported to

demonstrate that most of the leaders of Quebec were puppets of the financial powers.) In 1970 Fournier himself was briefly arrested for reading the FLQ manifesto over a radio station. This background has given him very good contacts with FLQ activists and the numerous hangers on. He has used his private sources and, together with material gathered from such public sources as the McDonald Commission, the Duchaine and Keable enquiries, has produced an informative, detailed and biased study.

The strength of the book lies in its detail: each organization, cell, participant, dispute, division, bombing, robbery and so on is covered fully. Fournier has much that is interesting to reveal about people both within the FLQ and those on the fringes. So, too, he has discovered more than a few important details about police infiltration and about the apparent incompetence of some of the police work. But the overwhelming impression left by his account is one of the chaotic state of Quebec in the late 1960s—chaotic, at least, if rhetoric bore any real relation to reality. The level of that rhetoric—talk about revolution, liberation, socialism, reform, nationalism, and so on—was so high that people, in fact, did begin to mistake it for reality. The young people in the FLQ, their heads filled with that rhetoric, actually believed that the population of Quebec were ready for revolution and that they were the vanguard. That sense is summed up brilliantly, and utterly misleadingly, in the manifesto they issued shortly after Cross was taken prisoner. It was the coming of that revolution that they believed would, retroactively, justify their criminal acts. It was, of course, all a fantasy. But they so successfully created the fantasy that some of their opponents believed that the FLQ represented a far more serious threat than later revelations would substantiate. This is not to say that terrorists who could kidnap two public figures and murder one, were not a serious threat. But there was never any real chance that a revolution or even an insurrection would occur. But there was enough rhetoric, and enough exploding bombs, and enough kidnapping to convince some people that Quebec was on the verge of the deluge. Enter the federal government with a blunt, brutal weapon—the War Measures Act. At that point the FLQ and its defenders cried foul. Here was true repression, so they said.

Louis Fournier represents the case of those who, while not members of the FLQ, accepted much of their rhetoric. Consequently he offers hardly a word of criticism of the terrorists,

other than to make clear that he thinks their tactics were mistaken. Their fantastic analysis of the condition of Quebec he fully swallows. Thus he, too, uses the same inflated rhetoric so familiar a decade ago—Quebec is a "colony", "occupied" by Canada, needing liberation. But that is stale rhetoric now. So is that of René Lévesque who, while always condemning violence, tried to use the FLQ crisis for his own political advantage. Listen to him after the murder of his former colleague, Pierre LaPorte: "If we maintain the same kind of society, the same kind of thing will keep happening. There must be far-reaching reform so there will be no more FLQ . . . How much longer will our young people continue to be discouraged by complacent adults? Let's get a move on . . . It's time to act and stop pushing younger citizens into revolt and crime just because they are not as patient as their fathers. The real solution is independence for Quebec." Fifteen years later, his electoral support vanishing and his party crumbling, Lévesque says even his attenuated version of "independence" should not be talked about, as for those impatient youth—they know better. In St. Jacques an aging PQ bureaucrat was recently defeated by a 26-year-old federalist.

It was not the social conditions of Quebec that created the FLQ. It was the inflated rhetoric of people like Lévesque, Pierre Bourgault, Pierre Vallières and dozens of lesser rhetoricians who seduced young people into believing that reality was what they said it was. "Words are weapons and, when used without precaution," the Quebec political scientist Léon Dion observed during the October crisis, "they are even more dangerous perhaps than physical weapons because they corrupt men's minds which, once corrupted, prompt ever more unconsidered actions."

This, of course, is not Louis Fournier's view, but he has presented his evidence in an honest manner thus allowing readers to draw their own, different conclusions about the events surrounding the FLQ. My conclusion is that the best epitaph for those years of Quebec's rhetorical revolution should be taken from the Irish poet W.B. Yeats, who knew what revolution meant. He wrote:

We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal on the fare;
More substance in our enmities
Than in love . . .

No wonder Pierre-Paul Geoffrey continues to search. Like the children of other revolutions, he is a victim of the one he tried to make.

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