

VARIATIONS ON A NATIONALIST THEME :
HENRI BOURASSA AND ABBÉ GROULX
IN THE 1920'S

SUSAN MANN ROBERTSON

Université de Montréal

Prior to the 1920's, Henri Bourassa was a revered and awesome figure for Lionel Groulx. Groulx saw in Bourassa all the qualities of the ideal *chef*.¹ To Bourassa he attributed the national revival in French Canada since the turn of the century.² Modestly, he described his own rôle in *L'Action française* of the 1920's as one of synthesis and propaganda for ideas stemming from Bourassa, *Le Devoir* and the entire pre-war *école nationaliste*.³ Indeed, it was Bourassa, with his erudite monologues on world affairs in the cosy atmosphere of abbé Perrier's presbytery⁴ and his impassioned pleading of the French Canadian cause during the First World War, who really initiated Groulx, the priest and professor, into contemporary politics. And Bourassa had even led Groulx to his life work: Bourassa had been largely responsible for the establishment of a chair in Canadian history at the Université de Montréal.⁵ Henri Bourassa pervaded abbé Groulx's life.

During the 1920's, however, there yawned a great gulf of suspicion, misunderstanding and disappointment between Bourassa and Groulx. He was my follower, where has he gone? mourned Bourassa.⁶ He was our leader, why did he fail us? queried Groulx.⁷

¹ Pour nous un homme enfin était apparu sur la scène, homme d'idées, d'une large et belle culture, d'une merveilleuse intelligence, d'un talent qui touchait au génie et qui projetait sur nos problèmes de fulgurantes lumières. L'homme était, en outre, de saine étoffe, d'une conscience noble, escarpée, inaccessible aux basses tentations. Canadien français jusqu'aux moelles, catholique sans marchandage, catholique ultramontain, que demander d'autre à un chef? L. Groulx, *Mss. Mémoires*, IV, p. 18.

² L. Groulx, *Histoire du Canada français depuis la découverte* (Montréal, Fides, 1960), II, p. 345.

³ L. Groulx, *Mss. Mémoires*, IV, p. 148.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17. Groulx claimed that Bourassa was one of two men he knew who had a truly international breadth of vision and interest. The other was Cardinal Villeneuve. *Ibid.* See also L. Groulx, "Henri Bourassa ou le causeur prestigieux", *Hommage à Henri Bourassa* (Montréal, Le Devoir, 1952), p. 119-125.

⁵ L. Groulx, "Henri Bourassa et la chaire d'histoire du Canada à l'Université de Montréal", *RHAF* 6 (déc. 1952), p. 430-439.

⁶ Interview with M^{lle} Anne Bourassa, Dec. 12, 1968; A. Bourassa, "Biographie d'Henri Bourassa", A. Bergevin, C. Nish and A. Bourassa, *Henri Bourassa. Biographie. Index des écrits. Index de la correspondance publique, 1895-1924* (Montréal, Editions de l'Action nationale, 1966), p. LIII.

⁷ L. Groulx, *Mss. Mémoires*, IV.