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Article Dealing with the Second Volume of Jean-Luc Barré's Biography of François Mauriac : an Irishman's Diary

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An Irishman's Diary

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AFTER THE hugely successful first tome of his François Mauriac biography, tracing the writer's puritanical Catholic upbringing, his early literary successes and the controversial revelation of his homosexual leanings, one might have expected Jean-Luc Barré's second instalment, covering the period from 1940-1970, to be less interesting. However, it is nothing of the sort.

Beginning in Nazi-occupied France, it covers three decades that are crucial in French cultural, political and literary history. François Mauriac was centrally involved in almost every important event that occurred during this time. Marginalised during the Occupation by a Catholic extreme right that strongly supported the Pétain regime and its German masters, Mauriac realised that his writing needed to focus more directly on the turmoil his fellow countrymen were undergoing as a result of their moral and military capitulation during the second World War.

Carefully maintaining an independent voice that just about managed to steer clear of Nazi censorship, Mauriac came to symbolise the French resistance and his words were regularly employed by Gen de Gaulle to rally the French people during his radio transmissions from London. A popular target of the ultra-conservative newspaper *Je suis partout*, where he received particularly harsh treatment at the hands of Robert Brasillach, Mauriac's reputation as an revered writer and member of the Académie Française probably protected him from his many detractors and, unusually for a devout Catholic, he even found allies among members of the Communist Party, with whom he collaborated on numerous occasions.

De Gaulle's triumphant return after Liberation boosted Mauriac's already lofty status. By this stage a regular columnist with *Le Figaro*, he came to be seen more as a political commentator than a creative artist. The public intellectual is not an unusual phenomenon in France, where writers like Aragon, Drieu La Rochelle, Gide and Camus – to name but a few – often spoke out on issues that were far removed from their primary literary function. Mauriac even used his influence as a de Gaulle ally to plead clemency for some controversial figures (most notably his former adversary, Brasillach) during what is referred to in French as *l'épuration* (the purging). These interventions exposed him to criticism from former supporters on both the left and right side of the

political divide. By now in his 60s, he was regarded as somewhat “passé” in literary terms, as the new wave of existential and experimental writers held sway in France during the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, Mauriac often fulminated about how literature had been overtaken by what he termed “philosophy professors”, a group with whom he had virtually nothing in common.

As a result of his appointment of the young and attractive Yves du Parc as his private secretary in 1946, Mauriac met a number of emerging writers such as Roger Nimier, who was the leading figure in a new review, *La Table Ronde*, to which Mauriac attached himself. (The infamous socialising by the main actors of this group fuelled even more rumours about their elderly patron’s sexual preferences).

All of which did not detract from Mauriac’s growing reputation on the world stage, which culminated in the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1952, at the age of 65. This award was a defining moment in Mauriac’s career. It was his fiction’s penetrating analysis of the human soul, and not his journalism, that drew favourable comments from the jury. In his acknowledgement speech, Mauriac thanked his English translator and fellow novelist Graham Greene for giving his work an international audience – Greene was himself in the running for the award the same year. He also commented on how his narrow focus on his native Landes area around Bordeaux allowed him to recount what were in essence universal experiences. Although his fictional characters resemble monsters more than saints – being often calculating, vindictive and acquisitive – their behaviour is continually informed by their Catholic faith.

By now the best-known personality on the French literary scene – his insightful “Bloc-Note” in *Le Figaro* courageously challenged public perceptions of issues such as French colonial policy in North Africa – Mauriac’s capacity for courting controversy never waned. While dubious at times about de Gaulle’s political strategy, which was characterised by a lack of tolerance during the student riots of May ’68, he nevertheless saw him as the one leader capable of bringing France through the political morass in which it was floundering after the second World War. When awarded the Légion d’honneur by the general in 1960, he felt, as always, humbled in the presence of the man who, like no other, had shaped France’s destiny. In fact, Mauriac regularly socialised with politicians of various hues – François Mitterrand, Georges Pompidou, Pierre Mendès-France and Maurice Schumann – but that did not in any way prevent him from castigating them when necessary.

Appropriately, Mauriac’s last work of fiction, *Un Adolescent d’autrefois*, published in 1969, returns to a setting

that closely resembles the Mauriac country abode of Malagar and his principal literary inspiration. Favourably reviewed by the critics, it gave Mauriac one final taste of success. His death shortly afterwards, on September 1st, 1970, was mourned throughout France and beyond. Although not universally liked, Mauriac's achievements were such that he could never be ignored. A tortured, conflicted soul in many ways, his fascinating life and work are memorably evoked in Barré's invaluable biography.

François Mauriac Biographie intime: 1940-1970 is published by Fayard.

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