
In Transforming the Nation: Canada and Brian Mulroney, J. Frank Strain states that his essay “is likely to contain something to offend everyone” (p. 42), an apt description of the entire collection, which gets at the heart of Brian Mulroney’s historical character and legacy. Edited by Raymond B. Blake, the wide-ranging opinions and analyses found in the 18 essays of the book cannot help but inspire strong reactions from readers because of the controversy that continues to surround Mulroney, and this is the beauty of the collection.

In his introduction to Transforming the Nation, Blake expresses his wonder over why a comprehensive study of Mulroney, “one of the most significant and important prime ministers Canada has ever had” (p. 14), has not been done before. The contributors quickly make up for lost time, each offering a comprehensive analysis of a different facet of his time in office. The collection is well constructed with three informal sections: the legacy of Mulroney’s policies, his interactions with Canada’s increasingly vocal and conflicting minority groups, and his personal approach to politics.

A central theme throughout each of these essays, especially in the first section concerned with his legacy, is the question of revolution. Mulroney was prime minister during a period in which Canada and the rest of the world were changing rapidly. In some cases, he used this transitional period to his advantage, especially on the campaign trail, when he was able to control the media in ways contributor Christopher Waddell states could never be possible under the scrutiny of the 24-hour news networks of today (p. 36). In other cases, these massive social, economic, and political changes were the reason for Mulroney’s downfall, as he not only encouraged them, but believed he could use them to his, and the country’s, overall advantage. The problem with this approach to governing, Blake argues, is that Canadians simply do not like change (p. 5), and many continue to blame Mulroney for being the messenger, if not the instigator, of these transformations.

The middle section of Transforming the Nation is by far the strongest, with excellent essays by Robert Wardhaugh and Michael D. Behiels, each offering a detailed analysis of how Mulroney tried to balance regional differences and
desires. In wanting to pacify everyone, including those in the West and in Quebec, Mulroney pleased no one with his attempts at policy revisions and constitutional negotiations. The discussion by Gina Cosentino and Paul L. A. H Chartrand of Aboriginal policy and politics during the Mulroney years also follows this pattern of excellent analysis. One of the strongest pieces in the collection appears in this middle section. In her examination of how women’s movements and issues changed while Mulroney was prime minister, Ann Porter provides a much larger story of how Canadian society and politics were radically discussed, debated, and transformed during this time.

The collection concludes with a series of essays by those who worked directly with Mulroney during his time in office. Some of these, such as the piece by Bob Rae, invite the reader into the heart of the former prime minister, which is often excluded in analyses of his two terms in office. During his time as New Democrat premier of Ontario, Rae observed Mulroney as a man with two personas: one public and one private. In public, the prime minister was often formal and reserved, while in private he “was funny, personal, and often profane” (p. 417). Essays by former MP John C. Crosbie and speech writer L. Ian MacDonald follow much the same line as Rae’s piece, each offering sincere and balanced insight to the prime minister’s character.

The weakest article in the collection appears in this last section. Elizabeth May writes an account of her time as an environmental advisor to the Mulroney government, and her flattery of the prime minister and his cabinet makes for a thin analysis and a somewhat embarrassing read. During his time in office, Mulroney, “Canada’s Greener Prime Minister” (p. 381), made significant advancements in environmental policy that should be applauded, but within the historical context, not in the context of self-congratulation and awe.

These pieces as a group are valuable additions to the collection because of Mulroney’s controversial historical image. To remember that he was neither a monster nor a superhero, but a man with a private self to which the public was not often privy, is important because it contextualizes his actions and decisions and challenges our assumptions about who he was and why he made the choices he did.

Each essay in the collection was designed to stand alone, and for the most part they do, which is excellent for those looking for more nuanced analyses of the key political, economic, and social changes Mulroney orchestrated during his two terms in office. However, the greatest strength of Transforming the Nation is the collection itself. Brian Mulroney was not just the Free Trade Agreement or the GST: he was prime minister of Canada during a period of intense national and global change, and his actions and policy need to be understood together.

While Michael Hart describes Mulroney as a “Faustian” character who bargained with the devil in his first term in office and paid the price for it in his second (p. 61), after reading Transforming the Nation, I found he appears to have more in common with Arthur Miller’s tragic hero, Willy Loman, grasping for and losing control of a new Canadian Dream. Mulroney did what he thought was best for the nation despite his downward spiral in the polls, resulting
in an approval rating of 11 per cent at the end of his tenure. While many believe Mulroney’s Canadian Dream was more like a nightmare, *Transforming the Nation* goes to great lengths to help readers understand, if not sympathize with, the former prime minister within the context of his time and place.

Jessica van Horssen  
*University of Western Ontario*


Ultra-nationalist French politicos frequently quote Charles de Gaulle as saying that he was comfortable with the presence of a few “yellow Frenchmen, black Frenchmen, brown Frenchmen,” but only “on the condition that they remain a small minority. Otherwise, France would no longer be France. We are after all primarily a European people of the white race.” In *Race et esclavage dans la France de l’Ancien Régime*, Pierre Boulle shows that such sentiments have deep roots. Boulle explores the ideological, legal, and social manifestations of racial prejudice in early modern France, concluding that the racism of the nineteenth-century empire originated in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century encounter between France and the peoples of west Africa and the Indian Ocean.

Boulle divides this fine study into three parts. The first — “La construction du concept de race en France” — is a largely intellectual history tracing notions of race as they were transformed by Atlantic expansion and the development of plantation slavery. In the seventeenth century and before, the French tended to view Africans as benign — if culturally backward — curiosities. Most believed that, with time and religious instruction, they could become like Europeans. As the French began to participate in Africans’ enslavement, however, they came to regard them as more permanently inferior, their moral and intellectual capacities inescapably limited by biology rather than culture. This “hardening of the concept of race” found many expressions, but by the mid-eighteenth century became so widespread that Boulle considers it the prevailing French attitude (p. 66).

In its broad contours, Boulle’s story is not surprising: slavery encouraged the formation of racial hierarchies throughout the early modern Atlantic. The French descended along their own path toward racism, however, and Boulle is an excellent (not to mention our only) guide as we retrace their steps. Boulle attributes the rise of modern French racism to three factors: the French encounter with non-Europeans, the rise of modern science (including the obsession with biological classification), and France’s growing secularization (which caused many to turn to biological explanations for cultural difference). The tragic historical coincidence of Africans’ enslavement led Caribbean planters, along with their missionary accomplices, to create an ideology that equated blackness with inferiority and slavery. In this theory, Africans became children who needed to remain in