

De Gaulle at Close Hand

Diaries 1944-1954: The Other de Gaulle, by Claude Mauriac, *New York: The John Day Company, Inc., 1973.* 378 pp. \$12.95.

THE RELUCTANT but compulsive diarist is hardly a rarity in the annals of history. Very frequently he has the obvious urge to preserve his name and reputation, or else he simply wants to keep a detailed record of his career. In at least a few circumstances, though, the diarist is motivated by the desire to preserve the name and reputation of another person. Claude Mauriac is a good example of this kind of writer. Son of the famous novelist, François Mauriac, he is primarily a literary critic, having done studies of such notable personalities as Malraux and Cocteau. Yet for a number of years he was the secretary and confidant of Charles de Gaulle. In that role, as he himself would honestly put the matter, he fell under the spell of the great man. Somewhat like Boswell writing about Johnson, Mauriac writes about de Gaulle. In some instances he is determined to prevent even trivia in the career of his idol from falling into oblivion. He is flattered that de Gaulle called him by his first name and admits that when he was actually in de Gaulle's presence, any doubts or reservations that he might have had would vanish at once. Convinced indeed that de Gaulle was the one great voice and resource of the nation, especially in times of trouble, he once sums up his feelings thus: "What elation I felt at being in such close contact with a great man! What pride in being one of his chosen men! How willingly I accept all the risks! How easy to decide not to let what disappoints me in him keep me on the sidelines!"

Regrettably, Mauriac's enthusiasm does not always inspire him to write with an attractive and lucid style, and most especial-

ly it has not inspired him with the importance of arranging for a good English translation. The present translation is often clumsy or inaccurate. A couple of samples among many that might be cited: a room that has simply been stripped of its furnishings is described as "devastated," and in another situation involving an impressive public ritual Mauriac is made to say: "Emotion kept Jules Roy and myself silent." Because Mauriac's book is no peripheral source but rather an indispensable one for the study of Gaullism, it is not too much to say that a new and intelligent translation is a simple necessity.

Strange to tell, the title of Mauriac's book is very accurately translated as *The Other De Gaulle*, but the title is, nonetheless, a poor one, for the book as a whole makes it clear that the title should have been something like *De Gaulle the Same Only More So* or perhaps *The Same de Gaulle from a Different Angle*. The de Gaulle known to most people is the formal, the almost pontifical de Gaulle, the grand figure who comes forth in personal memoirs or public pronouncements. The de Gaulle of Mauriac's pages is the informal de Gaulle who has seldom been seen and who often speaks impulsively off the top of his head about the issues of the day. People who expect the two de Gaulles, formal and informal, to be strikingly different will be in for a surprise. A surprise is also in store for people who expect that Mauriac's account of the informal de Gaulle will settle the argument between de Gaulle's admirers and his critics. It is an account, however important, that will provide plenty of supporting evidence for both sides. Those who see in de Gaulle the heroic visionary will continue to do so. Those who see in him the outmoded authoritarian will not change their minds.

Shortly after World War II, when Mauriac asked de Gaulle whether he would be willing to accept membership in the famous French Academy, de Gaulle replied negatively with this observation: "It's impossible after having represented France, after

having been France, to join one particular section of the community. The king of France did not belong to the Academy, nor did Napoleon." Later in 1947, when he organized his own political party, he had these words for Mauriac: "I don't have to thank people for joining the movement. Above all, don't give them the impression that they're doing me a favor, when, on the contrary, it's they who ought to feel grateful to me." In almost the same season but in a different mood he said:

Perhaps we've embodied and lived through the last great page of France's history. It may only prove to be a springboard for even better ones—and it may prove to be the last. The French people did not support me. They gave up, and foreigners are not mistaken. They recognize that France at last had a man of the required stature and that she had nothing more urgent to do than get rid of him. Even my enemies abroad have realized that France has turned down her great chance.

All of this is vintage de Gaulle: the smugness but also the despair. In Mauriac's record de Gaulle was constantly oscillating back and forth between these barely compatible feelings. He was sure that he had had an inspired past that would have been still greater had it not been for the weakness of his compatriots. Also because of their weakness he was being deprived of the distinguished present and future that were naturally his. His story as far back as the 1930's and 1940's had been one of setbacks. First of all, he had worked to get a motorized army for France. Then after disaster struck in 1940, he pressed the French government to go on with the war from North Africa. Still later, in November 1942, when the Anglo-Americans invaded the French possessions in that region he hoped to steer them away from doing business with his rivals, Darlan and Giraud. He failed. Even so, he was the one who pulled France through the war and who thereafter re-

mained the one great barrier against a Communist take-over in the country.

Beyond this point there was more failure. De Gaulle failed to guide the country towards a sensible constitution. Nothing was daily more evident than his loathing of the rottenness of the Fourth Republic and its political parties. Naturally he continued to regard himself as the real spokesman of the country ready to emerge from retirement on call. He would have liked to come to power in the style of Napoleon III, but he would also have liked this constitutional change to reflect a popular demand. There is no evidence in Mauriac that de Gaulle was planning a *coup d'état* or even that he was hoping to gain power by any means whatsoever. He was living in the world of fantasy not of conspiracy. Despite his reputation for vision he did not really foresee his eventual political triumph with the same intensity with which earlier in the darkest hours of World War II he had foreseen the victory of France and her allies.

There is one great paradox in Mauriac's work. However awestruck he may be at the very thought of de Gaulle, he is more than willing to report opinions and actions of de Gaulle that leave an impression of intolerance, unreasonableness, and just plain foolishness. In regard to the years of the war 1940-1945 Mauriac himself believes that de Gaulle was mistaken in refusing to distinguish between one group of Vichy supporters and another and in treating them all with equal scorn whether they stood by Vichy to its absurd end or whether they broke with it along the way. Especially cruel and questionable was de Gaulle's total lack of mercy towards French writers who had compromised themselves by working with the enemy.

Also questionable was his picture of the postwar years. By the middle of 1947 he became convinced that another war—The U.S.A. vs. the U.S.S.R.—was inevitable. The U.S.S.R. would be at a disadvantage because of its lack of technological and inventive skill. None of the great new weapons of World War II had originated with the Rus-

sians. "They were so behindhand in the atomic field that we have nothing to fear." Moreover even if they knew the secret of the bomb they would not be able to make it because they did not have the intricate apparatus and precision of manufacture that would be required. By contrast, the U.S.A. had the means to revolutionize present methods of warfare in less than two years and to perfect instruments of destruction beside which those they presently had were mere toys. Not many months after uttering these opinions de Gaulle received the news that the Communists had carried out a coup in Czechoslovakia fully establishing their own dictatorship. Despite the terrible provocation involved no general war followed. De Gaulle, now apparently less impressed by American moral and material strength, forecast another such take-over in Italy, a country that was especially vulnerable since it did not have the kind of protection which France enjoyed in the person of Charles de Gaulle himself!

In the area of more directly French problems de Gaulle's judgment and behavior also tended to be erratic. The loathing with which he spoke about the existing Republic in private was very much like the loathing with which he spoke about it in public, only more venomous and unrestrained. With perfect consistency, then, he resigned as President in January 1946. He had the sure conviction that he and the current system of political parties could not operate side by side, and yet barely more than a year afterward he was trying to reform this system from the inside. He organized his own political party, the RPF. It failed. It failed dismally. It was swallowed up by the very system that it was supposed to overhaul. It became just one more undisciplined grouping in the nation's parliament. In the meanwhile de Gaulle's bitterness mounted. He

believed that the governing politicians of the time were so unscrupulous that in order to save their parliamentary majority—and their positions—they would not hesitate to ignore ideological considerations and invite the Communists or Gaullists or both to join in a coalition ministry. De Gaulle, of course, would have none of it. By mid year 1948 he believed that the situation was so close to a complete collapse that desperate politicians would call off all further elections. Doubtless, as he himself was sure, the régime was suffering from a variety of economic and political weaknesses, but in believing that it was tottering towards its demise he was exaggerating these weaknesses enormously. When its final crisis came in the spring of 1958, the Fourth Republic did not founder on account of these weaknesses. Ironically enough, it foundered because of its dubious and persistent compromise with Gaullist ideas on colonialism that most observers today would regard as wrongheaded and quixotic. Even in the midst of World War II de Gaulle had made it clear that the liberation of France certainly implied a full restoration of the overseas empire. He was proud of the efforts that he made to that end right up to the point of his resignation. Thereafter, while rejecting many of the policies of Gaullism, the republic hung onto this most romantic policy of all, the policy of imperialism. But the policy would not work. First there was ominous failure in Indo-China, and then there was the failure that brought down the régime—the failure in Algeria. The irony, however, did not end there. It ended when de Gaulle returned to power and eventually came to the realization that Algeria was lost. It took de Gaulle to liquidate Gaullism.

Reviewed by BRENTON H. SMITH