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Article on the Latest Biography on Albert Camus : an Irishman's Diary

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An Irishman's Diary

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THE FRENCH-Algerian writer Albert Camus has always been a contentious figure in French intellectual life.

The son of a pied-noir farm labourer who died fighting for France in the first World War and of an illiterate mother who worked as a cleaner, Camus knew from his childhood experiences in the Belcourt area of Algiers exactly what it was like to be poor, unlike his contemporary, Jean-Paul Sartre, who came from a comfortable bourgeois background.

His education owed much to the interest taken in him by two of his teachers, the kindly M Germain, a war veteran who read extracts to his students from Roger Dorgelès's classic account of the heroic sacrifices endured by French soldiers on the front, Croix de bois, and the philosopher Jean Grenier, who visited Camus in his humble apartment and convinced his family of the value of the young man continuing in education. Without the benevolence of these men, it is doubtful that Camus would ever have become a Nobel laureate in 1957 or a writer of such world-wide renown.

Michel Onfray's new biography, *L'Ordre libertaire: La vie philosophique d'Albert Camus*, published by Flammarion, is quite different in tone and content to Herbert R Lottman's *Albert Camus: A Biography* (1979) or Olivier Todd's *Albert Camus: A Life* (1996), in that it sets out to rehabilitate Camus's reputation as a philosopher of substance, and not just a writer whose work is studied for the French baccalaureate. But was he in need of such rehabilitation? After all, in the 52 years since his death in a car crash at the age of 46, his work has enjoyed unprecedented popularity throughout the world. Not only is he studied by lovers of French literature, but he is also an essential reference point for philosophers and intellectuals of all hues.

It is strange to think that more than 30 years after the death of Sartre the debate still rages as to whether he or Camus produced the more authentic world view. Onfray is unashamedly in the Camus camp, pointing out the courage he displayed during the Resistance (a period during which Sartre, according to Onfray, was a lot closer to the collaborationist regime than the mythology carefully nurtured by his companion Simone de Beauvoir would

indicate), the stances he adopted in relation to the death penalty, the Soviet gulags, which in his view were equally indicative of uncontrolled totalitarianism as the Nazi concentration camps, and the military annexation of eastern Europe, which led to his decision to leave the French Communist Party.

He also had a more nuanced view of the Algerian Civil War, criticising the atrocities committed by the FLN with equal vehemence as the crimes of the French government.

Because he did not possess the same university training as the Parisian intelligentsia fronted up by Sartre, because his Mediterranean temperament and persistent ill-health (he suffered from tuberculosis from a young age) gave him an appreciation of the preciousness of life and the importance of people over ideas, some intellectuals did not give Camus the credit he deserved. Onfray quotes the following observation from Camus' Carnets: "Those who write in an obscure manner are lucky: they will attract commentators. The others will only have readers, which, it seems, is contemptible."

In 1945, responding to a journalist's question as to what he thought of his name being constantly associated with existentialism and its chef de file, Sartre, Camus replied: "I am not a philosopher. I do not believe enough in reason to subscribe to a system. What interests me is to know . . . how one should behave when one does not believe either in God or in reason."

One could never imagine Sartre making an admission like this.

Onfray contends that Camus was totally committed to truth and that this caused him to say things that would be deliberately misrepresented subsequently. A classic example is the unguarded statement he made in Stockholm in 1957 about the heinous violence raging in his native Algeria: "I believe in justice, he said, "but I will defend my own mother ahead of any justice". The context of this remark was that if he had to choose between the type of mindless justice meted out by Algerian terrorists and his mother, he would choose the latter, a not unreasonable assertion. But his enemies latched on to the phrase in order to present him as someone who preferred the white colonial class, the pieds-noirs, to the indigenous population (if one can speak of such an entity in the cultural melting pot that was Algeria).

Onfray's biography, once you allow for the obvious bias towards his subject and the deliberate demonisation of

Sartre, is a book that will appeal to anyone interested in the writer who produced such masterpieces as *The Outsider*, *The Plague*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Rebel* and *The Fall*.

The real significance of Camus is to be found in these works that remain as revealing of human nature today as they were over half a century ago.

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