

Peter C. Newman: *Caesars of the Wilderness*. Markham: Viking, Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1987. 450 pages.

Amidst considerable promotional hype and media coverage Penguin Books has published Caesars of the Wilderness, volume two of Peter C. Newman's trilogy on the history of the Hudson's Bay Company. Company of Adventurers, the first volume of the series, covered the years from the founding of the Company in 1670 to the formation of the rival North West Company in 1783. Caesars begins in the period of fur trade competition, moves through the era of consolidation and monopoly in the nineteenth century, and ends with the sale of Rupertsland to Canada in 1869 and the displacement of the fur trade by agricultural settlement.

Undaunted by the criticism of Company of Adventurers by fur trade scholars, Native organizations and others across Canada, Newman has continued his quest to "re-create the interplay of feisty characters and remarkable circumstances that shaped the story of the Hudson's Bay Company during the middle century of its existence" (p. xii). An ambitious undertaking, but what is the result? Ironically, Caesars of the Wilderness and its highblown claims to "unroll a new map of the Canadian past for contemporary readers" and to "extract live metaphors from the Dead Sea Scrolls of Canadian history" (p. xii), degenerates into a badly flawed, Eurocentric jumble of tired old cliches and stereotypes, factual inaccuracies and outdated interpretations. Eschewing any real primary research (only a handful of the book's endnotes refer to documentary sources) Newman relies instead upon secondary works that are often outdated, inaccurate or both. Like its predecessor, Caesars of the Wilderness largely ignores the fur trade scholarship of the last fifteen years in favour of the interpretations found in the works of an older generation of historians such as Frederick Merk, John Gray, Grace Lee Nute and Douglas MacKay, or in the anecdotal accounts of Grant MacEwen, Douglas Francis and Frank Rasky.

Newman's eclectic use of sources gets him into trouble throughout the text. His account of the Battle of Seven Oaks, for



example, repeats many of the traditional and racist interpretations of that affair and characterizes the Metis as savage "marauders" (p. 173) and "dupes of the North West Company [who] joyfully pulled the trigger" (p. 175) on the hapless but courageous settlers. A thoughtful and balanced analysis of the battle is sacrificed in favour of vivid images of questionable accuracy. According to Newman "the bodies of the dead [settlers] were stripped and dismembered in an orgy of mutilation" (p. 175). The fact that this version of events, as recorded in the biased accounts of the Selkirk apologists, has been seriously questioned by Red River scholars does not damper this author's enthusiasm for his portrayal of the Metis as bloodthirsty barbarians. In a long footnote on page 175 Newman even relates Alexander Ross' account of how many of the Metis combatants at Seven Oaks were to meet violent deaths. More than just "strange coincidence" this story betrays Newman's satisfaction that in an odd sort of way justice prevails and evil people are eventually punished.

On a broader scale, the difference between the Hudson's Bay Company and the rival Nor'Westers are exaggerated by Newman to almost the point of absurdity. In love with images of power he trots out many of the old cliches, describing the Montreal-based Nor'Westers as the "rampaging free enterprisers of the North American frontier" (p. xvii). The Baymen, on the other hand, are "sober, persistent [and] concerned with their own rightness" (p. 202). These are merely stereotypical, if comfortable, images that provide no real insight into the personalities of the fur trade or the way in which commerce actually evolved over nearly a half-century of competition. Romantic images of corporate Darwinism are used by the author to explain the collective identity of Canadians. For example, Newman states in Caesars of the Wilderness that there can be little doubt that "the North West Company was the forerunner of Canadian Confederation" (pp. 5-6). In Company of Adventurers, however, this same claim was made for the Hudson's Bay Company which, he says, "determined the country's political and physical shape, endowing the new nationality with a mentality that endures to this day" (p. 2). In



Newman's rush for cliches to describe and define the nature of the Canadian psyche (bureaucratic like the Baymen, proud and independent like the Nor'Westers) consistency, it seems, is simply tossed out the window.

As with volume one, Newman continues his negative characterization of the Indians' role in the fur trade, likening them to an "offstage Greek chorus" in the unfolding drama of commercial conquest. Caesars of the Wilderness is about "virile" white heroes, stock characters who by virtue of their heroic deeds, triumph over all adversity. Native people, on the other hand, play no part in the conduct of the trade and are treated as little more than willing victims of exploitation. The existence of viable Native cultures is given no real representation in this history of the fur trade. In fact, Indians are presented as little more than barbaric oddities who, when they are not providing a silent and sometimes sinister backdrop to the adventures of intrepid traders and explorers, are being "debauched" by alcohol. In his chapter entitled "Howling with the Wolves" Newman declares that the liquor trade in the West, "decimated Indian culture" (p. 113) and "amounted to the anaesthetizing of the First Nations" (p. 115). Lurid passages detail the various depredations performed by "drunken Indians" who commit (according to the trader Daniel Harmon) "a thousand abominations" (p. 114). Isolated and inflammatory quotes from a handful of observers are used to reinforce the stereotype of the Native as unwilling and unable to resist the temptations of alcohol. Accompanying this discussion on the effects of liquor is an appallingly racist nineteenth century American illustration depicting drunken plains Indians on their hands and knees lapping up whiskey which has spilled from broken kegs. Newman makes no attempt to analyze or critique this depiction, or to place it within its historical context; he entitles the drawing simply "Liquor in the fur trade" (p. 108).

The image of Native people in this book is more sinister than their portrayal as simply passive victims, however. A survey of the adjectives and modifiers used throughout the text to describe Indians indicates a much deeper stereotyping, especially when



these are contrasted with the terminology used to characterize European traders and explorers.

First let's deal with Europeans. Newman's white male heroes are invariably described as "virile," "proud" or "determined." For instance, Alexander MacKenzie (or "Big Mack" as Newman refers to him) is described as a "legitimate Canadian hero [with] a sensitive, almost pious, face" (p. 56). He is possessed of "virility and physical prowess [and] a mulish intelligence" which enables him to engage in "superhuman struggles" (p. 47). Dr. John McLoughlin, the former North West Company partner who later became head of the Hudson's Bay Company's Columbia Department, is called "a born again Elijah. His stern jaw, the disciplined set of his face and eyes, his grace of movement and careful speech," writes Newman, "all lent his presence natural authority" (p. 285). Where Simon Fraser is "heroic" (p. 81), George Simpson is "masterly" and "charismatic" (p. 221). Colin Robertson, the Company's agent in Red River during the early conflicts with the Nor'Westers, is described as the "Don Quixote of the Fur Country" (p. 171), "proud and combative" (p. 134) and "six feet tall and not afraid of any man's shadow" (p. 171). James Douglas has "glacial tenacity" and an "enduring romanticism." At Cowichan on the west coast, writes Newman, Douglas "sat stock-still on a camp-stool for most of a day, staring down two hundred armed and angry Indians" (p. 301). In the pages devoted to Lord Selkirk we discover that the Earl was a "benevolent King" with "compassion and affinity for the land" (p. 138). Possessed of "relentless determination" (p. 138), he "recruited himself as an agent of destiny, determined to alter the course of history" (p. 137). The heroic imagery continues. When on one occasion Chief Factor John Rowand was confronted by "two hundred Blackfoot clearly on the warpath he marched up to the chief and roared, 'Stop, you villains'--then turned his back and resumed his meal. Recognizing his opponent, the chief not only called off the raiding party but was so abject in his apologies that. . . many of the Indians 'actually cried with vexation'" (p. 240).



Contrast this type of positive, if romantic, imagery with the negative terminology reserved for Native people. On page 65 he tells us of "a fierce tribe of Indian middlemen." Two pages later we have a group of "hostile natives whose chief menacingly recounted a mysterious tale." Describing the violence between Gros Ventres and traders along the South Saskatchewan, Newman relates how the "menacing" Indians, "eager for combat" "slaughtered" three of the resident traders and "unceremoniously butchered" the local inhabitants. One of the fur traders who witnessed the "conflagration" managed to reach safety with his "grisly report" (p. 119). Elsewhere, we have the "cowed Dogrib" (p. 61), the "rampaging Blackfeet" (p. 276) and the "volatile Nez Perces" (p. 289). The "rampaging" and "hooting" Metis riding "wild-eyed horses" and "marauders" who at Seven Oaks precipitated an "orgy of mutilation" (p. 170). And in one remarkable passage we learn that North West Company traders in the West "left behind a legacy of alcoholism, syphilis [and] Mixed Blood babies" (p. 5), leaving us to presume that, for this author at least, all three are of equal consequence.

The above examples of negative stereotyping (and there are many others) are not isolated or unrepresentative of Newman's perception of Native people. Time after time the author's terminology betrays his view of Indians and Metis as savage, barbaric and treacherous. Sadly, at a time when historians are re-examining and discrediting many of the old ideas and paradigms concerning Native North Americans, Peter Newman has chosen to not only ignore the important role of Indians in Western Canadian history, but has reproduced some of the worst cultural stereotypes to be found in the traditional literature.

If the author feels that he is not bound by any of the newer interpretations, it is because he considers himself to be a "popular" historian who has imbued the story of the Hudson Bay Company "with the bounce and bravado [it] deserves" (p. xii). But whether he calls himself a popular historian or a journalist, Newman writes about the past and presents a version of events that obliges us to approach his work as critically as we would any

other. A close examination of Caesars of the Wilderness reveals more than simply "a colourful, twisty yarn" (p. xii). Cardboard characterizations, simplistic, cliché-ridden interpretation and hard-edged stereotyping make this a nasty little book, indeed.

Robert Coutts