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Vidal, Alexander and Thomas G. Anderson

1849

Report of Commissioners...on their visit to the Indians of the North shores of Lakes Huron and Superior for the purpose of investigating their claims to territory bordering on those lakes. Archives of Ontario, Irving Papers (typescript).

Sprague, D.N., Canada and the Metis, 1869-1885. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988.

It is time to stop blaming the victim. That is the message of University of Manitoba historian Doug Sprague in Canada and the Metis, 1869-1885. For too long, Canadian historians have laid the blame for the dislocation of the Metis from Manitoba in the 1870s and the subsequent 1885 rebellion on the Metis themselves, and not on the federal government. Sprague now challenges the idea of Ottawa's benevolence--what he terms the good faith interpretation of such historians as Bill Morton, Donald Creighton, and George Stanley--and argues instead that federal attitudes towards the Metis were anything but accommodating. Indeed, he suggests that "a genuine reconsideration of the evidence"(17) indicates that Ottawa acted in a duplicitous manner and that the provisions of the Manitoba Act that dealt specifically with Metis interests were maliciously undone by federal authorities. The migration of the Metis from Manitoba after the Red River Resistance was consequently a forced dispersal, and not the actions of a so-called nomadic, primitive race. The 1885 Rebellion, moreover, was deliberately provoked by the federal government; it was a desperate gamble by Prime Minister John A.

Macdonald to secure much-needed funds for the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

Sprague begins his study with an historiographical overview of the topic, in which he briefly outlines his purpose, and then turns to Canadian annexation of the North-West in 1870. He describes how the region was viewed as the means to empire by Ontario expansionists who hoped to recreate the best features of British civilization on the 'empty' prairies. What Ontario expansionists, and the federal government for that matter, did not consider, however, were the interests of the Red River settlement, and they tended to treat the acquisition as nothing more than a simple real estate transaction. This neglect of the local population, in particular the Metis, led to the 1869-70 Red River Resistance and the attempt by Metis leader Louis Riel to negotiate the terms by which the region would enter the Canadian union. This dramatic turn of events, according to Sprague, placed Prime Minister Macdonald in an extremely awkward situation. On the one hand, fearing possible American intervention, the Conservative leader was anxious to resolve the crisis expeditiously; on the other, he did not want to settle on Metis terms, particularly after the March 1870 execution of Orangeman Thomas Scott. In the end, Macdonald decided to meet with Metis representatives in Ottawa in the spring of 1870, while at the same time taking steps to dispatch a punitive military force to Red River to secure the region for Canada. Sprague argues that Macdonald's decision to negotiate was really a stalling tactic for his real desire--the punishment of the Metis.

The middle chapters of the book deal with the negotiations leading up to the Manitoba Act and the subsequent steps by Ottawa to ignore and subvert Metis interests in Manitoba. Relying largely on the Macdonald papers--the same correspondence to which previous scholars have had access--Sprague portrays a disingenuous prime minister. During the negotiations, the Red River representatives were assured that existing land holdings in the old settlement belt would not only be recognized, but that 1.4 million acres would also be dispensed to

Metis children in blocks along the rivers **before** the expected influx of Ontario settlers. In Parliament, however, Macdonald never disputed the common assumption that the Manitoba Act was merely a temporary measure designed to settle the Red River crisis and that thousands of Ontario settlers were expected to determine the true character of the new province.

This interpretation is not new; it is generally accepted that the Manitoba Act was negotiated by a federal government under duress and that Macdonald was not a believer in a bilingual, bicultural west, let alone a multi-racial one. What Sprague is emphasizing, however, is that the standard good intentions approach obscures the real intent of the federal government--that it negotiated with the Metis in bad faith and had no intention whatsoever of honoring the provisions of the Manitoba Act that would have given the Metis a strong land base.

Sprague supports this bad faith thesis in two ways. It is generally accepted that Ottawa continually sidestepped the Riel amnesty question because of the backlash that it would engender in Ontario; neither the Conservatives nor Liberals wanted to alienate the large Orange population. In Canada and the Metis, Sprague looks at the issue from a Manitoban perspective and argues that the federal government refused to honour its pledge of amnesty for Riel in order to deny the Manitoba Metis of their leader and spokesman. With Riel effectively in political limbo, the federal government could go about creating the conditions for an 'Ontario' West without having to worry about the Metis. To state, however, as Sprague does, that "...the denial of amnesty to Louis Riel amounted to a denial of responsible government to Manitoba..." (p. 89) overlooks an important point. Manitoba entered Confederation on an unequal footing because, unlike all other provinces, control of its natural resources remained under federal jurisdiction. It would have made little difference whether Riel occupied the premier's office or not--the province was denied control of its lands until 1930.

The other way in which the federal government acted in a malevolent fashion was through its manipulation of the Metis

homeland provisions of the Manitoba Act (sections 30, 31, and 32). And here both the Macdonald and Mackenzie governments were culpable. Throughout the 1870s, the federal government deliberately delayed fulfilling its obligations to the Metis, while at the same time doing everything possible to accommodate new settlers from Ontario. In particular, it revised through order-in-council or interpreted in an extremely narrow fashion the Metis land guarantees of the Manitoba Act so that the Metis became thoroughly discouraged with their prospects in the new province and relocated to Batoche or other Metis settlements farther West. For Sprague, then, the Metis were not 'pulled' westward during the period, but 'pushed' out of Manitoba. This is the most disturbing section of Canada and the Metis, and it raises enough questions about the process of Metis land distribution to support the recent Supreme Court of Canada decision that the Manitoba courts must hear the case of the Manitoba Metis Federation.

The last two chapters of the book deal with the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) and the 1885 rebellion. In this section, Sprague contends that the federal government did not simply ignore Metis rights but was willing to promote or generate conflict with the Metis for political purposes. He argues that Macdonald was kept well informed of the growing Metis unrest in Saskatchewan in the early 1880s and that he was far from oblivious to the situation as is sometimes suggested. In fact, the prime minister originally decided to pursue a policy of conciliation but then opted for "provocative inaction"(p. 167) to rescue the yet uncompleted CPR. Macdonald evidently reasoned, according to Sprague, that the Metis would back down in the face of a strong show of force and that the railway would receive the necessary aid thanks to its pivotal role in getting troops quickly to the region. The fact that a war broke out did not undermine this strategy.

This is the least satisfying part of the book. On the surface, the outbreak of the Rebellion around the same time that the CPR desperately required financial assistance is a suspicious coincidence. But it must be remembered that the federal

government, right from the time of the 1870 land transfer, was determined to avoid the problems that plagued the American West in favour of an orderly, peaceful frontier; it could not afford costly Indian wars or the like. To suggest, then, that Macdonald deliberately risked provoking a rebellion to save the railway is highly improbable. Settlement of the region was well below what had been anticipated, and a war, however minor or restricted, would have made the region only more unattractive to prospective settlers—even if the railway was completed. It would be more plausible to assume that Macdonald linked the railway and the Rebellion only after troubles had erupted in the West; it would have been surprising, given Macdonald's opportunism, for him not to make the connection.

Sprague also notes that George Stephen, President of the CPR Syndicate, mentioned the railway and Riel in the same letter to Macdonald in November 1885, a few days after the driving of the last spike. That Stephen referred to the two topics in the same letter does not necessarily mean that he linked the two. Stephen actually believed that the Rebellion was a bad thing for the railway. On 18 April 1885, three weeks into the Rebellion, Stephen wrote his friend and business associate J.J. Hill:

Although everybody here is pleased that it was possible to forward the troops to the North West through Canadian Territory, so far as we are concerned, it would have been an advantage to us had it been possible to send them through the States, as the transportation of so large a body of men and material interfered sadly with the progress of our work. But for this, the rails would now have been laid all the way through. As matters stand, I do not expect the laying of track to be completed for two weeks yet....

This half-breed outbreak has been a nuisance, and, in the first instance must be more or less damaging to us, though I am inclined to think it will do good ultimately. One thing it is sure to do—that is to concentrate one settlement near the Railway. 1

Clearly, Stephen's own assessment of the situation casts doubt on Sprague's interpretation.

Canada and the Metis is a provocative book. Doug Sprague is to be commended for challenging traditional assumptions about

Canada's treatment of the Metis and offering alternative interpretations; in particular, his description of the way in which the Metis lost their Manitoba land base should be read by every student of Western Canadian history. The book also suggests other possible rewarding areas of research. It is one thing to describe federal policy towards the Metis, but quite another to determine exactly how this policy affected the Metis. There need to be detailed studies of how Metis parishes in Manitoba responded to federal manipulations of the Manitoba Act. Canada and the Metis also, unfortunately, lacks balance; there is always the danger that a corrective, in seeking to revise past interpretations, will go too far the other way. Sprague concentrates almost exclusively on the relationship between the federal government and the Metis and is especially preoccupied with Macdonald's part. Other important factors, such as Riel's role in 1885, consequently do not receive the attention that they deserve. Sprague also pushes his evidence too far in places, and some of his assertions raise more questions than they answer. This is not a bad thing, though. If Canada and the Metis causes serious scholarly re-examination of other accepted assumptions about the Metis, then the history of Canada stands to benefit.

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NOTES

¹The James Jerome Hill Reference Library, J.J. Hill Papers, G. Stephen to J.J. Hill, 18 April 1885.

Marianne Boelscher, **The Curtain Within: Haida Social and Mythical Discourse**, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988.

Writing another book about the Haida is more than an ordinary challenge. In the popular view the Haida have an extraordinary standing--fierce warriors, intrepid ocean voyagers, unsurpassed artists. There is a grain of truth in each superlative, yet never the whole story. This book will not satisfy the readers looking for renewal of such romantic ideas. Nor will it please all