

embody the triumph of good over evil. My reservation in recommending this as juvenile literature stems from Malcolm's grizzly description of the coroner's inquests. Not only does he detail the sawing, chiselling and probing that took place, but adds how the coroner peeled the scalp forward to cover the face since "it was far easier to detach oneself from a faceless corpse" or how the skull cap popped off "as he might remove the top half of a walnut shell" (pp. 132-133).

Malcolm's book deals with an important theme in Canadian history but contributes little to our knowledge of crime and criminal justice. What we need is more attention to the criminal's perspective, his circumstances and the social forces that motivated him rather than more stories glorifying the Mounted Police.

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Epic Fiction: The Art of Rudy Wiebe by W.J. Keith. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1981. Pp. 148, \$10.00, paper.

Rudy Wiebe, the Saskatchewan-born "storymaker" (as he calls himself), is a writer who grows on one, even though his personal beliefs, especially his strong evangelical faith, might not be congenial to every reader. There are places, as in the early novels *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) and *First and Vital Candle* (1966), where Wiebe gets too didactic and the preacher shows through the artist. But Wiebe is not always uncritical of his religious position and, in fact, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* caused a furor among his folk and led to his resignation as editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, the official voice of the faithful. Over the years Wiebe has also moved beyond the confines of a particular sect and has come to grips with a variety of human conditions.

The widening of Rudy Wiebe's interests and the development of his artistry as storymaker are the subjects of a recent book by W.J. Keith called *Epic Fiction: The Art of Rudy Wiebe*. Professor Keith takes a long and critical look at Wiebe's writings from the early stories to the later and larger ("epic") novels and he is primarily concerned with the author's "art," more specifically, such literary problems as "structure" (how the parts of the stories are fitted together) and "genre" (that is, the names we give to such great, sprawling works as *The Blue Mountains of China*, 1970, which chronicles the Mennonites' pilgrimage from old Russia to the New World, and *The Temptations of Big Bear*, 1973, the saga of that great Indian leader's struggle against the white man and his inevitable and therefore tragic defeat). Keith's book is organized along chronological lines with each of the five main

chapters devoted to one of Wiebe's novels from the first, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, to the most recent book, *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977), which appeared just before Keith began his study. Such a linear arrangement is, of course, not too imaginative, but it does work since Wiebe's writings develop along the lines which the critic follows. Although the book is written by an academic critic, the non-specialist should find *The Art of Rudy Wiebe* surprisingly easy to read.

If Professor Keith does not impose artificial patterns upon his materials, as some critics do (to the distraction of their readers), he does build a rather heavy case for Wiebe's complexity as a writer. For example, he notes that Wiebe is "traditional" but not "conventional," he is "unique" yet "representative," and he is sometimes, as in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, "technically non-Christian but none the less visionary" (as if only Christians were open to visions!) (pp. 7, 13). At times it seems that the critic must prove that Wiebe is really a heavy-weight contender in the so-called CanLit arena. The storymaker has gone beyond the lyric mode to create, in Wiebe's words which Keith quotes, the "giant fiction" (p. 8). Wiebe's attempts to capture vast historical expanses, such as the *whole* Louis Riel story in *The Scorched-Wood People*, make great "demands" on the reader, as Keith points out, and in the case of many passages it takes a second reading for Wiebe's reader, as the critic again notes, to find out just what is actually happening in the first place. In other words, Wiebe uses modern storytelling techniques (e.g., indirect quotations or interior monologue, impressions mixed with facts, mingled "voices" to suggest divergent points of view) to bring life to the dead statistics and vanished witnesses of the straightforward history book.

However, the critic is probably closer to both the difficulty and the power of Wiebe's writing when he suggests that the later novels call for an imaginative sympathy, on the reader's part, with the experiences of the heroes. Wiebe had made a major effort to catch an alien consciousness. Despite the often stilted way in which his characters think and speak, Wiebe really seems to zero-in on the Indian and Métis experiences of the fabled Great-Plains days. Keith talks about Wiebe's major theme of the "possibly life-transforming influence of one person upon another" (p. 48), and it's just possible that reading Wiebe might radically affect one's awareness of Big Bear, Gabriel Dumont, Louis Riel and the Eskimo "Oolulik" (the last-named being a character unsurpassed, in her kind, by even Yves Theriault's "Agaguk").

As a trained critic, Professor Keith is aware of considered opposition to some of Wiebe's creations. He notes, for example, that critics have argued that Big Bear's "pacifism" might be closer to Wiebe's Mennonite faith than to any Cree belief. But, of course, we are reading a giant artifact and we should ask whether the character *works* in the novel. To some readers Wiebe, born a Mennonite, seems to have an

almost genetic affinity for other ethnic minorities! It is silly to try to dictate taste and the individual reader will pass his own judgment on the success or failure of *The Temptations of Big Bear*.

Or again, the fate of *The Scorched-Wood People* does not depend solely on the characterization of its hero, Louis Riel. Professor Keith sums up the deep *poetic* truth of this novel when he writes that "the pattern of Riel's life suggests a mysterious association between his own fortunes and those of his race, though by a tragic irony Riel's death coincides with that of his nation instead of being a surrogate for it" (pp. 94-95). When it comes to naming the genre to which this novel belongs, the critic melds categories: "historical novel," "epic," "elegiac lament," "domestic tragedy" (a rather loose usage on Keith's part), and "scriptural story" (a somewhat cumbersome parallel on Wiebe's part). Let the reader decide if the critic is correct in saying that "no other Canadian novelist — indeed, no other novelist — now writing. . . has attempted, let alone achieved, the heightened effect Wiebe produces here" (p. 104).

Professor Keith is obviously a writer with a cause to fight for. *The Art of Rudy Wiebe* contains a number of interesting observations (e.g., Did you ever think of the relation between Riel's sexuality and his prophetic vision?) and the book is a definite contribution to an understanding of Wiebe, even if the critic protests too much. The book certainly proves the inadequacy of the comment, made by one prominent critic, that Rudy Wiebe is "chic."

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The Last Great Frontiersman: The Remarkable Adventures of Tom Lamb by Leland Stowe. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 1982. Pp. 272, \$16.95, cloth.

This might have been a very good book. Certainly the subject, Tom Lamb of The Pas, Manitoba, had a long, colourful and significant career. In Mr. Stowe's book there is colour aplenty; but the significance of Lamb's career is compromised by the author's unhappy determination to draw him larger than life. And Mr. Stowe's less than adequate knowledge of Canadian political institutions robs the context of credibility.

Tom Lamb clearly deserves a book. As most westerners are aware, he was much more than simply the founder of a successful regional airline, although that, in itself, was a substantial achievement. Without Lamb, and other bush pilots and flying entrepreneurs, the development of the northern mining frontier would have been very different and much delayed. It was also Lamb who initiated the technique of