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Blair Stonechild and Bill Waiser. *Loyal till Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion*. Calgary: Fifth House Ltd., 1997. ix + 310 pp. Appendices including note on sources, notes and index. \$18.95 (paper). ISBN 1-895618-88-6.

One of the most enduring historical myths perpetuated by Euro-Canadian scholars has been that the First Peoples of Prairie Canada were willing participants, along with their mixed-descent Métis cousins, in “rebellious” against the federal government’s Aboriginal policy during the 1885 Resistance. During the 1880s, Aboriginal people and many Euro-Canadians on the Prairies were angered by Ottawa’s cavalier disregard of Aboriginal concerns. Many of the First Peoples of western Canada were starving on their reserves and wanted to renegotiate their treaties with the Dominion government. Ottawa’s assimilative policy of turning Indians into Christian yeoman farmers had failed miserably. At this time, the Métis had repeatedly petitioned the federal government to ensure that their land base along the Saskatchewan river valley would be preserved prior to the anticipated influx of European farmers. The farmers themselves were waiting for a railway and lower tariffs. Ottawa failed to respond adequately to either the First Peoples or to the Métis. Euro-Canadian grievances largely dissipated during the hysteria generated by the Resistance. Many Métis and some First Peoples, therefore, resisted the federal government’s unjust Aboriginal policy.

This event, known as the Riel, Northwest, 1885 or Saskatchewan Rebellion/Resistance, was a formative event in Canadian history. The 1885 Resistance was also another example of the world’s indigenous peoples resisting the expansion of European empires into Aboriginal homelands, a common theme in the late Victorian epoch. Both the traditional historiography and popular imagination have maintained that there was a united Aboriginal front in central Saskatchewan during the 1885 Resistance. It is also believed by some that this event almost led to a regional Native uprising and the end of Canada’s troubled integration of the Prairie West. For instance, Stanley (1960) and Creighton (1955) asserted the theme of Aboriginal solidarity during the 1885 conflict. Their Eurocentric analysis was further evident when they argued that the 1885 Resistance was a result of the supposedly “primitive” Aboriginal population of Western Canada resisting the advent of Ontario “civilization.”

Stonechild and Waiser demonstrate that the Woodlands Cree had their own distinct political agenda leading to and during the events of 1885. They argue that the Cree and Métis were involved in two separate and unrelated resistances. The Cree continued their decade-long resistance against what they considered unfair treaty terms and pursued the creation of a large reserve of the Cree Nation, while the Métis fought to preserve their land base along the South Saskatchewan River. The authors stress that there was no united Aboriginal front during this resistance since most Cree did not “rebel” against the Crown. (Interestingly, even the Métis community in Western Canada was divided into two irreconcilable groups during this event: those who resisted and those who did not.) Moreover, the authors argue that the Cree peacefully attempted to renegotiate their treaty terms and reaffirmed their loyalty to the Crown, but that this strategy was destroyed both by the calculating and myopic policies of the central government and by the untimely and fatal Métis uprising. Once the resistance started, certain events prevented Cree neutrality. For instance, Wandering Spirit and other war leaders in Poundmaker’s and Big Bear’s bands led a faction

of the Cree into making war on Euro-Canadian settlers once word reached them that the Métis resistance had begun.

After the resistance was crushed, Prime Minister Macdonald and Indian Affairs Commissioner Edgar Dewdney invented the myth that Poundmaker, Big Bear and other Cree leaders were disloyal rebels against the Crown and its "just" treaty terms. The authors contend that this was a deceitful ploy designed to avoid honouring treaty obligations and to punish these activist chiefs. Even though the two great chiefs did everything in their power to avoid bloodshed during the resistance, both became imprisoned and soon died as broken men. The authors argue that these Cree leaders were scapegoats for the federal government's racist Indian policy and were victims of Victorian Canada's latent xenophobia.

The authors' thesis is not original. It is an expansion of earlier work by Stonechild himself (1986) and by historian John Tobias (1983). Nevertheless, the book is a welcome addition to the literature on the 1885 Resistance. The literature, to date, has largely focussed on the manoeuvrings of Louis Riel, and Ontario and French Canada's perspective of this integral event in Aboriginal-Euro-Canadian relations. The First Nations' perspective has been neglected, and this publication will discredit that faulty canon of Canadian historical writing, which maintains that Indians and Métis embraced one another to fight their common colonizer in 1885. The authors should be commended for portraying the devastating impact of government policy upon First Peoples in a very readable prose. This book will educate the uninitiated, and will probably be on Native Studies and Canadian History reading lists.

The authors, however, have numerous biases, which regrettably colour their narrative. Their analysis is, in fact, anti-Métis. The Métis desperately desired and needed First Nations support in their struggle with Canada; however, Stonechild and Waiser imply that the Métis were in fact colonizers in their own right, who forcibly conscripted First Nations people to their lost cause. In the end, the reader is left with the impression that the Métis were little different in their attitudes towards the Indians than the arrogant and vengeful English Canadians. For example, the authors indicate that the First Peoples were vulnerable to the "insidious" activities of Riel's "agents," who "bullied" the Cree into "rebellion" and exploited anti-government feeling among the Cree (p. 145). Stonechild and Waiser argue that the First Peoples were unwitting and meek pawns in the bloody game of chess played by Métis and Euro-Canadians. The authors implicitly suggest that this "pacifist" strategy was a majority view held by all Cree bands, from which only isolated hotheads in Poundmaker's and Big Bear's bands deviated. Even if this interpretation were correct, the authors would have been less biased if they had presented the view of each "war" party within each Woodlands Cree band. For instance, were the war parties in each Cree band preparing for war, in the event of a Métis victory against the Canadian military during the anticlimactic battle at Batoche? Moreover, Waiser and Stonechild failed to adequately analyze the psychological impact of the proselytizing of the peace and war factions within each Cree band. Why were some leaders able to convince some Cree to remain neutral, and why were some able to stir martial ardour?

The book's very title uses two key terms "loyal," and "rebellion," which implies that Indians were loyal to the Crown during the Resistance and the Métis were "disloyal" and "treasonous." The failure to include the term "resistance" in the title and the anti-Métis tone of the book suggest that Métis insurgents were less serious than Aboriginal ones, that their uprising was frivolous and was bent on destroying Indian-White relations. It is as though the old theme of the "evil Halfbreed" has been conjured up by both a First Nations and a Euro-Canadian scholar to show how rebellious "Halfbreeds" destroyed a united but "loyal" First Nations strategy. Nowhere

in the book is there any analysis of why some Métis saw no recourse but to fight. This necessary context to this particular event should have been included in the analysis. Downplaying or ignoring the Métis' reasons for confronting the Canadian state is dismissive of those Métis who fought and died for their right to exist as an Aboriginal nation.

Stonechild and Waiser go to great lengths to illustrate the federal government's unjust policy of treating the Cree and Métis differently after the resistance was suppressed. They excoriate the execution of eight Cree leaders at Battleford, Saskatchewan, and the federal government's refusal to grant them traditional burials. This was a shameful event in Canada's past, but to lament the creation of Louis Riel as a martyr sacrificed on the altar of Canadian intolerance and lack of respect for Aboriginal self-governance is an unfruitful exercise (p. 214). More energy should be spent honouring the memory of those eight leaders who paid the ultimate price for living and being executed in Canada's systematically racist society. Stonechild and Waiser argue that it was manifestly unjust that the punishment of First Peoples was much greater proportionately than that of the Métis, who instigated the resistance. Yet, it was no fault of the Métis that such Métis "rebels" as André Nault and Abraham Montour were not tried and executed for treason, while eight Cree leaders were (p. 209). The authors fail to mention that the French and Roman Catholic Métis had the political power of the French-Canadian electorate, traditionally 30 percent of Canada's population, to protect them from English Canada's full retribution. The First Peoples, unfortunately, did not have such assistance.

Stonechild and Waiser should also have indicated the psychological impact of the Frog Lake "Massacre" upon Euro-Canadian opinion. This event resulted in the deaths of nine Euro-Canadians and a Métis farm instructor by Cree war leaders. These killings were a result of years of frustration with the government policy of starvation and oppression on reserves by ruthless Indian agents. In fact, only those individuals who caused harm to the Cree, including Thomas Quinn, a notorious bully, were killed. All other Euro-Canadians were left unmolested. This was important background information which Euro-Canadians did not have when they became bent on suppressing the Battleford area Cree. To Euro-Canadians this "massacre" brought back painful memories of the destruction of British General Charles G. Gordon's regiment at the hands of Sudanese Muslims outside of Khartoum in January 1885 and of the infamous Indian Wars of the American West. As a result, this action invited Canada's full and vindictive retribution and led to the exceedingly harsh treatment of the Cree and the political execution of eight of their leaders. The fact that the Métis were not involved in a similar engagement which took the lives of Euro-Canadian settlers explains why they were treated less severely than their First Nations counterparts. Again this is necessary context which should have appeared somewhere in the text.

Stonechild and Waiser's research is not blessed with many Resistance-era primary documents from an Aboriginal point of view, and none from a Métis perspective. Reading the book's introduction leads the reader to assume that the authors' work is based on extensive primary source documentation, especially oral interviews with Cree elders (p. 4). However, when analysing the end notes one discovers that approximately a few dozen interviews with First Nations elders were used. Very few of these voices were female. No Métis oral history or secondary sources were employed. And of the First Nations sources used, there was no discussion of the methodology used to determine whether or not the interpretation of these events by the Cree elders was held by the majority of their bands. Most tellingly, much of the interpretation on which the book rests originates from interviews with the late John Tootoosis, the former head of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians. Tootoosis was an exclusionary

First Nations nationalist who had no sympathy for Métis issues. Moreover, the book is heavily reliant on the Macdonald and Dewdney papers, sources which are hardly sympathetic to either the Métis or to the First Peoples. As for secondary documentation, the authors make great use of various works by Thomas Flanagan, Canada's leading anti-Métis iconoclast.

The book is interspersed with many photographs and artists' renditions of key events which took place during the resistance. The inclusion of contemporary illustrated images makes this book appear to cater to the less well-informed, and it subconsciously implies that the authors are not so much telling history as creating it. This appealing but flawed monograph contributes to the existing literature because it presents a First Nations perspective of this seminal event in Canadian history. And yet, one wonders if the authors have a hidden agenda in writing this book: are they trying to whitewash the role which Indians played in the military campaigns of the 1885 Resistance? They have certainly downplayed the roles which many First Nations war leaders played in the Resistance. No mention was made of the exploits of Cree war leader Fine Day, arguably the finest military strategist on either side during the Resistance. All readers of this book should be warned that its anti-Métis bias, failure to provide historical context, and lack of solid Resistance-era primary documents make it a popular rather than an academic history.

References

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