

REVIEW ARTICLE

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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.

Introduction

One of the newest works of Native history continues the trend not only of exposing government culpability but also of exonerating Natives of any wrong-doing. Until the 1983 article by J.L. Tobias, "Canada's Subjugation of the Plains Cree, 1879-1885," in the *Canadian Historical Review*,¹ which details government culpability, the story of the Native involvement in the events of 1885 had generally been characterized as one of collaboration with the Métis. More recently, works such as Noel Dyck's *What is the Indian "Problem": Tutelage and Resistance in Canadian Indian Administration*² and Sarah Carter's "Controlling Indian Movement: The Pass System"³ and *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy*,⁴ demonstrated a greater understanding of the Native situation as exacerbated by federal government policy. Works such as Walter Hildebrandt's "Battleford 1885: The Siege Mentality"⁵ and J.R. Miller's *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*⁶ went even further toward a view absolving First Nations of guilt.

The newest scholarship on the issue of Native involvement in the 1885 Rebellion follows the trend toward exoneration and Native political correctness. *Loyal till Death* tells the story of Indian involvement in the Rebellion from a Native point of view. In the prologue, the authors emphasize their use of oral history sources and, continuing the thought from the title, tell the story of a Native population which was unfailingly loyal to the Queen. Readers familiar with the government rendering of the Rebellion or the Métis account will find the version found here quite different. In particular, the stories of Cree diplomacy up to the fall of 1884, the encounter at Duck Lake, the events around Fort Battleford and the flight of Big Bear's band give a distinctly Native view of the events.

The arrival of a new text coauthored by Native scholar Blair Stonechild and university professor Bill Waiser could not fail to raise some expectations. Some of those expectations — for example, of history told from a Native point of view — have been met. Otherwise, those expecting freshness and the use of first-person narrative, as in Stonechild's *Saskatchewan Indians and the Resistance of 1885: Two Case Studies*,⁷ will

1 J.L. Tobias, "Canada's Subjugation of the Plains Cree, 1879-1885," *Canadian Historical Review* 64, no. 4 (1983): 519-48; also in J.R. Miller (ed.) *Sweet Promises: A Reader in Indian-White Relations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

2 Noel Dyck, *What is the Indian "Problem": Tutelage and Resistance in Canadian Indian Administration* (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1991).

3 Sarah Carter, "Controlling Indian Movement: The Pass System," *NeWest Review* 10, no. 9 (May 1985): 8-9.

4 Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests: Prairie Indian Reserve Farmers and Government Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

5 Walter Hildebrandt, "Battleford 1885: The Siege Mentality," *NeWest Review* 10, no. 9 (May 1985): 20-21.

6 J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

7 Blair Stonechild, *Saskatchewan Indians and the Resistance of 1885: Two Case Studies* (Regina: Saskatchewan Education, 1986).

be disappointed. The use of oral interviews is apparent only in the footnotes; in no place do the authors list the interviews or even name the reserves and elders consulted, in spite of the promise of disclosure in the prologue entitled "Lifting a Blanket."

Loyal till Death promises "the first comprehensive look at the Indian version of the North-West Rebellion." The question in my mind is not so much whether that promise has been kept as whether it was a wise promise to make. As might be surmised from that description, the book attempts to make a single narrative of a complicated set of overlapping events — to tell the definitive Indian version of a story that was as multifaceted in its Indian episodes as it was in its Métis/Halfbreed episodes.

In western Canada's history, there may be no set of circumstances that so splintered communities and families as the North-West Rebellion. Some of the problems of telling the Indian story of the Rebellion come from the sheer diversity of ethnicities involved and the innumerable life-choices that this diversity allowed. Given that the Indians involved included Ojibwa, Woods Cree, Plains Cree, Assiniboine and Dakota, it surely would be surprising if there was only one Indian narrative line. When, as Stonechild and Waiser point out, that diversity is complicated by intermarriages between the Métis and Indian communities,⁸ surely it is folly to try to describe the actions of all the Indians within one framework. Actually, to give due credit, Stonechild and Waiser do tell at least the Assiniboine part of the narrative in a much less definitive style.⁹

Bearing in mind these limitations, Stonechild and Waiser have done an admirable job in delineating a unitary picture of Indian point of view and activity at that time. The story is effectively told in an emotionally moving style that the general reader will be able to identify with. For the general public, it is perhaps necessary to paint a simple picture to begin with, and to use accessible sources so that the readers may look further into these issues on their own initiative.

The Narrative Line

The single narrative line begins in 1870, when prominent Cree leaders signalled their agitation at the rumours about the apparent sale of their lands by requesting meetings with Canadian representatives following Canada's purchase of Rupert's Land and the northwestern territories from the Hudson's Bay Company. With that event, the authors begin the three chapters that cover the history of Cree passive resistance before 1885. That section includes the signing of Treaty 6 at Fort Carlton and at Fort Pitt in 1876. Cree leaders who signed included Mistawasis, Atahkakoop, and Sweetgrass.

From 1876 to 1885, the Canadian government neglected its treaty promises for other priorities, such as building the transcontinental railway. During this time, the buffalo were killed off, and consequently, the Indian population was reduced to a state of wretchedness that has had no equal in modern Canadian history.

One of the responses to diminishing buffalo herds was the movement of the Plains Indians south to the area around the Cypress Hills and into the United States. In 1882 Edgar Dewdney, the Indian commissioner, decided to move all Indians north out of

8 Blair Stonechild and Bill Waiser, *Loyal till Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion* (Calgary: Fifth House, 1997), 74, 80.

9 *Ibid.*, 98.

the Cypress Hills and denied aid to any band that refused to go north. Included were the bands of Piapot, Little Pine and Big Bear. In the end, Big Bear signed an adhesion to Treaty 6 at Fort Walsh in December, and Dewdney then closed the fort.

In 1883, the auditor general targeted the Indian rations program for cutbacks, and in September the prime minister responded to the recession by ordering Dewdney to cut Indian expenditures wherever possible. Rations were reduced, as was the number of agency and reserve employees. Still greater misery followed for the people on reserves.

On 8 February 1884, Yellow Calf led a group of Indians on the Crooked Lake reserve in raiding the government storehouse; they defended their actions by pleading starvation. That spring Piapot prepared to hold a Sun Dance where the terms of Treaty 4 would be discussed. In return for abandoning his plans, he was allowed to take reserve where he wanted on the Qu'Appelle River. In late spring, Big Bear sponsored a Thirst Dance on the Poundmaker reserve, which was complicated by the "Craig incident," a confrontation between the Indians and the NWMP. Big Bear's request for a reserve next to Poundmaker's was met with a suspension of aid until the band took their assigned reserve in the Fort Pitt area.

Riel arrived in the area on 1 July 1884 and took part in the community meetings and petitions. The authors take pains to point out his goal to forge an Indian-Métis alliance. Big Bear was intercepted on the way to Fort Pitt after the Sun Dance by a delegation from Chief Beardy with a request to attend a special council. The Duck Lake council was another attempt by the Cree chiefs to have their grievances addressed. The proximity of Riel and his attendance at the council were seen by the government as proof of an alliance, but he was granted only a brief audience. The Cree chiefs continued their work toward a grand council; Indian Affairs officials began work on a plan to undermine the Cree leadership; and the Métis began trying to get the Indians to revoke their treaty pledges.

On 19 March 1885 the Métis leader, Louis Riel, declared a provisional government. In the weeks immediately following, several Indian leaders across the West came forward with declarations of loyalty to the Queen and to the Treaties they had signed. Among them were Mistawasis and Atahkakoop.

The next section in the book begins with the narrative of the first shot exchanged between the government and the Métis on 26 March, which killed a blind Indian elder who had innocently walked into the middle of the fight. This incident illustrates how the Indians found themselves included in battles against their wishes; again the government took the events as a signal that the Cree were allied with the Métis. The authors go to some lengths to present evidence that the Indians were not cooperating and that officials had information on their loyalty from Dewdney's agent, Peter Ballantyne, as well as reports from Lawrence Clark, who the authors find more trustworthy than Crozier, who was nervous about the whole situation.

The narrative line then follows the Indians through their involvement and coercion in the Métis battles. They focus first on the story of the involvement of Poundmaker's band in the "unnecessary nervousness" at Battleford, and then return to Big Bear and the events on 2 April at Frog Lake. The events up to and including the rout at Cut Knife Hill are then presented with much discussion of the activities of Métis agitators in the Poundmaker camp. The next chapter presents the authors' version of the Métis battles and the proximity of Indians to the battlelines; it ends with the surrenders to Middleton.

The narrative then moves back to Big Bear's band in flight and the "Strange" chase, the pursuit led by General Strange. The story of the release of the prisoners and

the surrender of Big Bear is followed by a very interesting discussion of the trials and then of the hangings and imprisonments.

On 27 November 1885, eight warriors were hanged at Fort Battleford in Canada's largest mass hanging. The public executions were designed to teach the Indians that the whites ruled, and people were brought from the reserves around Battleford to watch the event. After touching on the exodus to the United States, and spelling out the government retaliation and its consequences, the authors conclude with a short chapter in which they request that the official record be set straight.

Unfulfilled Expectations

Academic readers will be less satisfied than the general public with the narrative structure. The authors promised a book based on new scholarship from archival sources and oral history. Instead, many sections are seemingly based entirely on previously published works. For instance, pages 32-39 are based on Sarah Carter's *Lost Harvests*; and pages 53-55, describing the "Craig Incident" of 1884, are based entirely on the version found in Hugh Dempsey's *Big Bear*,¹⁰ although there is an entire publication given over to the various versions of that story.¹¹

How the Narrative Differs

This narrative differs from the old version in certain ways which have already become standard, such as the assertion that Native episodes were only loosely related to the Métis episodes and that the federal government was culpable for the uprisings. It also diverges from that new standard in some very specific and somewhat surprising ways. In the old standard, the Aboriginal population suddenly arose in 1885, with no previous disturbances or provocation; in the new standard, the Cree chiefs in northwestern Saskatchewan acted out in some very specific and thoughtful ways in order to try to move the federal government to honour and re-negotiate the terms of Treaty 6, while specific individuals responded to harsh treatment by government employees with violence against them. In this version, whatever happened was accidental or part of a collision begun by someone else or under the physical coercion of the Métis, with whom the Natives never deliberately cooperated.

The authors begin with their version of the Assiwiwin story of the Duck Lake battle, a story which appears to be entirely Blair Stonechild's, as it is presented in a totally new variation found only in his works. In discussing the actions of the Big Bear band, the group of Plains Cree with their white captives from Frog Lake, and the neighbouring Woodland bands, all included in one big camp, the authors use language which minimizes past violent activities. In describing their activities after the sacking of Fort Pitt, the authors use the stalemate between factions as a sign of the passive intentions of the whole band:

The Indians ... in one of their few acts of defiance, set fire to the buildings that had housed the police. The camp's next move — or lack of one — affirmed the Indians' passive intentions. For the next six weeks, the perpetrators of the most

10 Sarah Carter, *Lost Harvests*, 50-72; Hugh Dempsey, *Big Bear* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre Press, 1984), 123-34.

11 Ross Innes, *The Sands of Time* (North Battleford: Turner-Warwick Publications Inc., 1986). Campbell Innes, historian and author of the introduction to that volume, called those events "The Cree Rebellion of 1884" and William Blaisdell Cameron, author and sometime public historian, claimed the Natives called it "The Time We Nearly Fought the Police." See W.B. Cameron, in "When Poundmaker Defied the Mounties," *Maclean's Magazine* (1 May 1926).

bloody acts during the rebellion had remained peacefully in the area, uncertain what to do or where to go."¹²

Again, in discussing the "siege" of Battleford, the authors treat the whole Cree group which had arrived at Battleford on 30 March as one corporate body rather than as members of different bands and individuals with their own power. According to the authors, there were no Cree in the vicinity of Battleford after the looting on the evening of 30 March: anything done after that was an act of either the Assiniboine or the Métis.¹³ This is somewhat strange, in light of the presence of Cree children from the Battleford residential school at the Battle of Cut Knife.¹⁴

A Review of the Oral Interview Transcripts

In the prologue, "Lifting a Blanket," the authors set out their agenda by use of the subtle motif of lifting a blanket to uncover the oral tradition. They discuss how oral history was combined with the work of previous historians:

Over the last decade, however, many elders have agreed to tell what they know about the North-West Rebellion by recounting stories that had been passed down through the generations in the traditional manner. And when this historical information was combined with a thorough review of the primary government records, it became apparent that the First Nations role in the troubles has been sadly misrepresented or grossly misunderstood — despite the recent efforts of historians working in the area.¹⁵

As the book states, a series of interviews was funded by Parks Canada for this study. Fifty-seven interviews were collected; of these, only twenty-five interviews were on topic, from only oral traditions and with enough details to be useful. Some of the details are useful only in the context of other interviews, but this would seem to be common in oral history work. Unfortunately, however, the authors chose not to analyze the interviews in this way.

The interviews seem not to have been appraised for validity or with a consciousness of the way oral knowledge is reflexive and fluid. In one interview cited,¹⁶ the elder mentioned several times that he had read rather widely, from some of the best scholarly work in the area. If he is considered an authority, as elder of his community, he should be sharing his new knowledge with his people. If the point of doing oral history is to recover a community's unique perspectives, what happens to that perspective when the elders begin to quote from the dominant society's scholars? At what point is this no longer oral history? It would have been useful for the authors to have discussed oral history issues, including that interview, perhaps in an afterword or another appendix. A possible question they could have answered is: did that elder quote the books as authorities or did he say, "This is how we relate to those texts"?

Of the fifty-seven interviews, the authors used only sixteen. As well, they quoted twenty-nine times from interviews carried out in 1985. Several times, the version of the narrative chosen by the authors was based on one or two interviews, disregarding other versions or evidence: for instance, the story of the events which took place in

12 Stonechild and Waiser, *Loyal till Death*, 182.

13 Ibid.; see especially pp. 98-105.

14 Personal communication, Del Stephen, Stampede Ranch, Alberta, 31 August 1997.

15 Stonechild and Waiser, *Loyal till Death*, 4; see also 267-68, fn. 13 and 14.

16 Stonechild and Waiser, *Loyal till Death*, Don Chatsis interview, Prince Albert, 3 February 1994, about Métis activities in Poundmaker's camp before the Cut Knife encounter, 134 and 285, fn. 34.

Thomas Quinn's house on the morning of 1 April 1885 is based only on the Fred Horse interview.¹⁷

Similar concerns arise when some of the incidents described in the oral history interviews are compared to secondary sources. Some of those incidents are pivotal to the understanding of crucial events in the story. For instance, the Assiwiwin story,¹⁸ known in Canadian history as "the firing of the first shot in the North-West Rebellion" at the beginning of the battle of Duck Lake, is based largely on the Harry Micheal interview.¹⁹ In his 1994 interview Micheal conflates the actions of "Gentleman Joe" McKay in 1885 with those of William McKay, Jr. in 1884. Although the authors do mention that there are other sources that mention Assiwiwin,²⁰ they seem to have missed three versions of the story which are to be found at the University of Saskatchewan. Two were collected by W.B. Cameron²¹ and the third is in a pamphlet published in 1935 by the Prince Albert *Daily Herald*.²²

One of the versions collected by Cameron and that in the pamphlet are attributed to "Gentleman Joe" McKay, who by all accounts fired the "first shot." The other one collected by Cameron purports to be the story of events as told by Assiwiwin to the Métis before his death. The views of the incident in those three accounts agree with each other and are similar enough to the presentation of the story in the book to be of value; but they were missed or not used, perhaps because their view of Assiwiwin in the company of Isidore Dumont and as an active participant in the beginning of the fight contradicts the view of Natives as helpless victims.

This is not the first time that Stonechild, in particular, has examined this story. Assiwiwin's story told by Harry Micheal of Beardy's Reserve appeared in his other published works.²³ Indeed, the later document includes a bibliography which, while it does not list the oral interviews, does give some appreciation of how Stonechild's work, including his present collaboration with Waiser, is not new scholarship as much as it is re-interpretation of existing published and unpublished sources in light of the evidence given in the oral interviews.

The particular agenda that drives *Loyal till Death* is made explicit in the last chapter:

Contrary to popular belief, the Indians of western Canada did not look to Louis Riel for leadership; nor were they unable to think and act for themselves during the difficult transitional period following the disappearance of the buffalo. The Cree had developed their own strategy for dealing with the Canadian government and its tight-fisted implementation of the treaties and this strategy did not include open rebellion.²⁴

17 Ibid., 112-13.

18 Ibid., 65-69.

19 Ibid., 65 and 275, fn. 1.

20 Ibid., 68 and 275, fn. 9.

21 University of Saskatchewan, Special Collections, Morton Collection, W.B. Cameron, MSS C350/1/28.1.

22 Saskatchewan Archives Board, F73.1, "Reminiscences of Riel Rebellion of 1885 as told by Old Timers of Prince Albert and District Who Witnessed those Stirring Days," pamphlet (Prince Albert, Sk: The Herald Printing Co. Ltd., 1935).

23 Blair Stonechild, 1986a, "The Indian View of the 1885 Uprising," in F. Laurie Barron and James WalDRAM (eds.), *1885 and After: Native Society in Transition* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1986), 155-57; and in 1986b, *Saskatchewan Indians and the Resistance of 1885: Two Case Studies* (Regina: Saskatchewan Education, 1986), 26-27.

It is unfortunate that the authors chose to argue for the exoneration of the First Nations by vilifying the Métis. This view is perhaps best exemplified by their summation on Cree diplomacy: "When Louis Riel chose open rebellion over negotiation, he derailed the diplomatic offensive that had consumed the lives of Big Bear, Little Pine, and other Cree leaders since being evicted from the Cypress Hills."²⁵ In this view, the chiefs are reasonable diplomatic players and the Métis are the real rebels: this summarily dismisses all the years of Métis negotiations and diplomacy between South Branch and Ottawa.

In their final statement, the authors go even further:

It has fallen to elders to set the record straight. They have quietly maintained for years that the Indians did not violate the treaties, that there was no Indian rebellion, and that the Indians were not rebels. The story of how the Indians kept faith and remained loyal to the Queen during a time of national crisis has been passed from one generation to the next. It is now up to the Canadian government to finally acknowledge this fact, in keeping with the reciprocal spirit underlying the treaties. As one Indian elder remarked, to insist on telling the story of 1885 from the official government perspective alone is akin to the man who believes that the sun comes up just when he opens his eyes."²⁶

Considering this statement, it would seem fair to say that *Loyal till Death* is about exoneration. True, there was no generalized, planned rebellion; but it is not so easy to exonerate Imasees, Wandering Spirit, and Itka as examples of those individual Indians who acted out their frustration. True, the government was deliberately intransigent. Perhaps telling all the stories, not just the correct ones, would generate more understanding of the Native perspective. Perhaps *Loyal till Death* can act as a good beginning for a public disclosure of government culpability. Now perhaps the rest of the stories may also be told.

24 Stonechild and Waiser, *Loyal till Death*, 239-40.

25 Ibid., 192.

26 Ibid., 241.