

Book Reviews

The Battle of Batoche: British Small Warfare and the Entrenched Métis by Walter Hildebrandt. Ottawa: Historic Parks and Sites Branch, Parks Canada, 1985. Pp. 120.

Centenaries have an irresistible charm for publishers and tourism officials alike. A hundred years after Riel's defeat and execution, Canadians may expect a modest deluge of paper about events which myth-makers and historians alike have over-populated for years. Walter Hildebrandt's profusely illustrated book about a century-old skirmish will be a timely means of separating tourists from a little folding money at the Parks Canada interpretation centre at Batoche.

Buyers will be well served. Hildebrandt is certainly no stylist and he forgets that not all historical sources are created equal, but his conclusions, on the whole, are sensible and well-argued. His picture researcher, Jack Summers, has done an excellent job. In addition to the familiar collection from the Glenbow and the Public Archives, he has ranged as far as the Army Museum in Halifax. The local work of Parks Canada is evident in the number of photographs of Métis families involved in the 1885 events. The aged survivors, often portrayed years later, provide a vivid contrast to studio portraits of young militiamen, eager to display their military finery to the camera.

Unfortunately the resulting book is not worthy of their efforts. Whether Parks Canada wanted to cut costs or distribute patronage to an inept and unnamed printer, the typography reflects the limitations of primitive computer setting and photographic reproduction has robbed the James Peters originals of some of their texture. Appearance may not be everything in a book but it matters in a publication whose chief market will be the passing tourist. As a battle, Batoche did little to undermine Canada's reputation as "the peaceable kingdom." The West's longest and bloodiest battle was also the most titanic struggle on Canadian soil since 1814. It lasted three and a half days and consumed twenty-five lives. A nation must make what it can of its history. Lacking a Tamburlaine or an American Civil War to give our history sufficient bloodshed, we must be content with Batoche. Participants and their heirs have tried to raise it to the status of an epic. Incipient Canadian nationalism was fed on the legend that militia officers had wrested victory from the Métis despite their bumbling British commander. A later mythology, now reinforced by a commemorative stamp, insists that the Métis commander, Gabriel Dumont, was an unsung military genius.

Hildebrandt tells all. Indeed, in its minute dissection of every phase of the little battle, marked by such phrases as "The Firefight for Mission Ridge" or "The Building of the Zareba," he comes close to parodying those monumental volumes in which some American historians have

chronicled the lesser engagements of the Civil War. Hildebrandt's theoretical guide has been Sir Charles Callwell's little classic of 1896, *Small Wars: Their Principle and Practice*. While he cites and might even be tempted to endorse such native Canadian critics as Charles Pelham Mulvaney or the frustrated cavalier, Colonel George Denison, common sense and Callwell persuade Hildebrandt that the government commander, Major General Fred Middleton, made correct decisions about as often as any human being has a right to expect.

Photographs help emphasize what many authors forget: Frederick Dobson Middleton was almost past retirement age when he came to the Northwest in 1885. He was a short, red-faced soldier with an enormous white moustache, the spitting image of the as yet unborn Colonel Blimp. He had been recommended for the Victoria Cross during the Indian Mutiny but was denied it on the claim, astonishing to a later generation of soldiers, that all staff officers were expected to be courageous.

Less obvious from Middleton's appearance was the fact that he had married a young French-Canadian, Eugenie Doucet, during an earlier posting to Canada, that he was a passionate proponent of the new and controversial notion of mounted infantry and that he was a thinker and a writer in an army that normally did little of either. Frankly, when Middleton came to Canada in 1884, the alternative was retirement on a colonel's half-pay. Canada wanted a general on the cheap, who would make no fuss about political patronage in the Militia Department. Canada got better than it deserved.

Running a military campaign in the Northwest was an extra Middleton had not bargained for. Neither had Canada. Unlike their aged general, few Canadians were aware of how unready they were. With difficulty, waggon trains, field hospitals, supply lines and scouts could be organized; soldiers able to move and fight on command could not be. Indeed militiamen, from private to lieutenant-colonel, had all the self-confidence of ignorance. Lieutenant-Colonel W.D. Otter, detached to relieve Battleford because he was the ablest Canadian officer, nonetheless ignored Middleton's urgent warnings and set off on a foolish expedition to Cut Knife Hill. He and half his men might have been destroyed if Poundmaker and his Crees had not decided to let the Canadians escape. If officers were wilful and unwise, their men were utterly green. Unless they enjoyed marksmanship as a hobby, few of the Winnipeg Rifles or "the smart city battalions" from the East had fired their Snider-Enfield rifles.

Against Middleton's column, guerrilla tactics might well have been effective. Later, Dumont insisted that Riel had rejected his plea for night attacks. They would be "too barbarous" and, besides, there might be French-Canadians among the troops. Certainly Middleton knew how easily his raw troops might be panicked by a night attack and he exhausted his strength in nightly rounds of his sentries. Only at Fish Creek, on the boundaries of Métis territory, could Dumont attempt an ambush, but the

Canadian scouts easily exposed the trap. Middleton was too good a soldier to be caught like that in the daylight.

The crucial question about the Métis campaign in 1885 was why after challenging the government, Riel insisted on remaining passively at Batoche. Like Bob Beal and Rod McLeod in their excellent book on the 1885 campaign, Hildebrandt argues that the Métis approach to war, as at the Grand Coteau in 1851, was essentially defensive. What worked against the Sioux would work against the Canadians. Beal and McLeod go farther and insist that Dumont himself appears nowhere in the minutes of the Exovedate urging the offensive spirit. Were his reminiscences, like those of General Middleton himself, written with the wisdom of hindsight?

Once the Métis had decided to defend Batoche, Middleton's strategy was confirmed. The modern theory of guerrilla war insists that there must be no stronghold a conventional army can capture. Riel was no revolutionary; neither was Dumont. Having launched his rebellion, Riel had little more to contribute to the Métis cause but his prayers. Middleton could approach his task with cautious professionalism. The caution was merited. At Fish Creek, his militiamen had shown their inexperience. They could easily have done so again on 9 May, amidst the dense bush south of Batoche. Pitching camp close to the battle was a safeguard against panic and the site chosen by Middleton's young quartermaster-general, Captain H. de H. Haig, was the best available.

Hildebrandt records the criticisms that poured later from the pens of some of Middleton's Canadian subordinates, many of them absorbed without acknowledgement in Mulvaney's instant history of the campaign. With a few exceptions, he concludes, the critics were wrong. Arming the *Northcote* and sending her downstream might have turned into a disaster but the Métis were suitably distracted. Middleton's caution at Batoche was a shrewd policy. Métis morale soared on the first day only to drain away when they realized that soldiers who had tumbled to the ground were not dead but hiding. Middleton's caution had another reason, reflected in his letters to the British commander-in-chief, the Duke of Cambridge. Regular troops would not only have been more disciplined; they would also, in a measure, have been more expendable. His Canadian volunteers were not. At Fish Creek, he told the Duke, he had been shaken at the sight of respectable clerks, merchants, artisans and their sons, who had set out in the spirit of a Sunday picnic but who now lay dead or painfully wounded. Middleton certainly wanted a quick campaign to save Ottawa money but once he was at Batoche, he would take his time to save the lives of his citizen-soldiers.

His citizen-soldiers had no such inhibitions. Their officers thirsted for glory; the men were bored. When Middleton's planned diversion on the morning of 12 May miscarried, his militia colonels seem to have taken tactics into their own hands. The mad charge down the hill to Batoche, against out-numbered and almost ammunitionless Métis provided the

Canadians with a suitably romantic conclusion to the battle. It also cost more than half the lives lost in the battle, Canadian and Métis.

If the spontaneous Canadian attack had miscarried disastrously, Middleton would have carried the blame. Since it succeeded, at a cost, he took the credit and shared it with his infantry brigadier, Lieutenant-Colonel Bowen Van Straubenzie. His Canadian colonels never forgave him. Neither have their heirs, descendants and admirers.

Despite modest defects in style and appearance, Walter Hildebrandt's book is a useful contribution to the mountain of literature on the events of 1885. He would have benefitted from harsh editing and a more competent book designer. His desire to cram in quotations from sources of utterly disparate quality, from the informed Charles Arkell Boulton to the egregious C.P. Mulvaney, must bewilder most readers. It is puzzling that so little effort has been made to relate the book to the present historic site at Batoche. Perhaps Parks Canada wants its visitors to buy a second book.

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The West: The History of a Region in Confederation by J.F. Conway.
Toronto: James Lorimer, 1984. Pp. 261.

I suppose that like anglophone and francophone, eastern and western Canadians will always live in an uneasy and sometimes acrimonious relationship. It is strife that, like winter, must be endured. J.F. Conway's Book, subtitled *The History of a Region in Confederation*, purports to chronicle the economic and political development of the Canadian West since 1867. However, the use of the word "history" to describe this work is somewhat inappropriate. It is rather an unconvincing polemic based on scanty research, dubious or specious argument, and excessive use of language. If the author intended through his book to gain sympathy for the Canadian West, he succeeds only in irritating the reader and discrediting his purpose.

This book is a one-sided, one-dimensional lament for the colonized, exploited, and unhappy West which has never received a fair deal from central Canada and probably never will. As the author puts it, "western Canadians repeatedly struggled to construct Canada's political and economic order, not only to redress the grievances of the region, but to bring more justice and economic security for all Canadians." (P. 5) In return, the Métis were cruelly cheated of their western lands and later were subject to "attempted genocide." (P. 43) Western farmers were equally hard done by, though to be sure, not subjected to genocide. The CPR was the machination of Prime Minister Macdonald, not to act as the backbone of a greater Canada, but rather as a monopoly to exploit the farmer and compel him to buy expensive eastern Canadian manufactured goods.