

BOOK REVIEWS

The Red River Rebellion by J.M. Bumsted. Toronto: Watson & Dwyer Publishing Limited, 1996. 359 pp., appendixes, index, maps, photographs.

Much has been written about the 1869-70 Red River Resistance and the birth of the first of Canada's Prairie provinces, Manitoba. Yet few historians have told the story of this resistance on its own, isolated from the *longue durée* of Métis, Manitoban and Western-Canadian history. This book does just that, concentrating solely on the Red River Resistance without including the more cataclysmic 1885 Resistance in its analysis. Without the inclusion of the context of the 1885 Resistance, however, reading Bumsted's monograph is like reading half of a well-known novel without finishing it, since you already know the outcome.

Traditional Eurocentric accounts of the Red River Resistance were written from a political point of view, concentrated on the actions of the political class, and were devoid of any Aboriginal primary sources or ways of thinking. For instance, George F. Stanley (1960), Donald G. Creighton (1955) and W.L. Morton (1967) concentrated on the Resistance's main players and not the rank and file of the Métis resistance fighters: Hudson's Bay Company freighters, pemmican provisioners and bison hunters. These Euro-Canadian scholars argued that the "primitive" Métis "rebelled" against Canadian (read "Ontario agrarian") "civilization" in order to preserve their "nomadic" and "indolent" lifestyle.

These "traditional" monographs, written in the 1950s and 1960s, failed to adequately analyze the socioeconomic causes which led the Métis to resist the Canadian state since the individual, the "great" man, was analyzed and not Métis society as a whole. Indeed, a staple of traditional Canadian historical writing until the 1960s were political biographies of such great men in Canadian history as prime ministers, soldiers and diplomats; men who transformed Canada into a nation from an insignificant British colony. This great man theme was also applied to such Métis leaders as Louis Riel (Stanley 1963) and Gabriel Dumont (Woodcock 1975). Interestingly, both Métis leaders became "great" based on Euro-Canadian standards and were not assessed as such by Aboriginal criteria.

A new generation of Canadian scholars is critically analyzing the Red River Resistance from a myriad of perspectives, greatly enriching the historiography in the process. These scholars have widely divergent opinions on this formative event. The pro-Métis historian D.N. Sprague (1988) maintains that the Canadian government systematically robbed the Manitoba Métis of their land base after the implementation of the *Manitoba Act* in 1870. By contrast, political scientist Thomas Flanagan (1983) argues that the two great Métis resistances were purely the result of the ambition and greed of a deranged religious visionary, Louis Riel. Other historians offer different views between these two interpretations. For instance, Frits Pannekoek (1991) contends that the Red River Resistance was a result of sectarian strife between the Protestant and English-speaking "country-born" mixed-bloods and the French-Catholic Métis. Gerhard J. Ens (1996) argues that the Red River Resistance was in reality a class war between the francophone-Catholic Métis proletariat and everybody else in Red River society, including the Métis bourgeoisie. Finally, J.M. Bumsted, a respected Manitoba historian, has written several articles on the Red River Resistance in Canada's leading popular history magazine, *The Beaver*. *The Red River Rebellion* is his first book on the topic.

Bumsted's intent in writing this monograph is to provide the reader with a rich temporal description of the Red River Resistance by including the views and actions of as many of its participants as possible. This monograph is, therefore, a political history. However, it avoids falling into the trap of the Great Man of History school by being very inclusive: no one individual, not even Louis Riel, has a preeminent position in Bumsted's narrative. Bumsted's book is an incident-by-incident account of the resistance from the viewpoint of a variety of its participants and, as such, is a fine narrative history.

Bumsted's interpretation, however, needs further work. The book has no real discernible theme. An implicit theme of Canadian bungling in the whole transfer of the Red River territory to Canada is evident, but this is tempered by the author's efforts to downplay the rabid extremism of the Canadian Party. These were racist members of the Orange Lodge who opposed the Métis and advocated the region's immediate annexation to Canada. The social, economic and political causes which forced the Red River Métis to resist Canadian authority should have been better analyzed and most importantly, the concept of ethnohistory is not employed anywhere in the book. The use of ethnohistorical methodology would have resulted in a more balanced analysis since it may have provided a better understanding of Métis motivations. All told, twenty-two pages deal with the factors leading up to the Resistance (pp. 16-38). The monograph could have had more analytical content: events and participants' actions are detailed, but the consequences and long-term effects of these were not thoroughly articulated. For instance, only one paragraph analyzes the impact of the execution of Thomas Scott upon the Canadian psyche. The execution of this member of the Orange Lodge resulted in Canada's eventual retribution against the Red River Métis after July 1870 (pp. 165-66). This event, more than any other, was responsible for Louis Riel's own 1885 execution.

Métis people would be dismayed to learn that the author failed to present the Red River insurgence as an Indigenous resistance. The book's very title persists in using the outmoded word "rebellion." Who were the Métis actually "rebellious" against — the Crown, the Hudson's Bay Company or the prospect of having an arrogant and distant government intruding in their lives? Furthermore, the author treats the military expedition led by General Wolseley following the conclusion of the resistance as a great event, a test of nationhood for the young Dominion of Canada. Little is mentioned in his discussion about the repression that followed, which cost the Métis some lives and much property (pp. 215-220). The repression of the Red River Métis by Canadian soldiers during the Wolseley expedition is one of those "uncomfortable" facts, which has been either ignored or downplayed in the historiography. Only three pages of the book deal with the Métis lands question, and there is no analysis of the systematic dispossession of the Métis land base in the new province of Manitoba after 1870 (pp. 228-230).

The Métis are not called "Native" people in the book. Only First Peoples are described as "Native." The francophone Métis and the anglophone Country-born mixed-bloods are called "Creoles." Throughout the narrative, the Métis resistance fighters are portrayed as armed brigands terrorizing the European, First Nations and Country-born population into supporting their cause. Riel is portrayed as an articulate gang leader, and as is the case with all the other Métis listed in the book, his motives are not fully analyzed. Bumsted's Eurocentric bias is further indicated when he writes that the Red River Métis community was "static," and was unable to adapt to the ongoing socioeconomic changes beginning to overtake the Canadian West. Is this a euphemism for the "savage-civilization" dichotomy? Gerhard Ens, another Manitoba historian, illustrates that some Métis adapted to the changing economy of the

nineteenth century and the gradual disappearance of the Plains bison by embracing capitalism and commercial farming (Ens 1996). Finally, no Aboriginal oral tradition is used in the text and all primary documents consulted are from Euro-Canadian sources.

Despite all of this, Bumstead has provided scholars with much useful information, including a 79-page appendix of all the main participants of the Red River Resistance. There is also a brief historiographical essay of works pertaining to the Resistance. In the future, this book may not be considered essential reading for the Red River Resistance. Nevertheless, it will be beneficial to anybody interested in knowing more about some of the players and intrigues which led to the creation of a province and the beginning of the Canadian state's conflict with the Métis. Although this book is not conducive to an Aboriginal understanding of these events, historians will make good use of it because it is well-documented and well-written.

Darren R. Préfontaine
Gabriel Dumont Institute
Saskatoon

Bibliography

- Bumsted, J.M. *The Red River Rebellion*. Toronto: Watson & Dwyer Publishing Limited, 1996.
- Creighton, Donald G. *John A. Macdonald: The old Chieftain*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1955.
- Ens, Gerhard. *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Metis in the Nineteenth Century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996.
- Flanagan, Thomas. *Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered*. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1983.
- Morton, W.L. *Manitoba: A History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967.
- Pannekoek, Frits. *A Snug Little Flock: The Social Origins of the Riel Resistance of 1869-1870*. Winnipeg: Watson & Dwyer, 1991.
- Sprague, D.N. *Canada and the Métis, 1869-1885*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988.
- Stanley, George F. *Louis Riel*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1963.
- Stanley, George F. *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960.
- Woodcock, George. *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and His Lost World*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1975.



kôhkominawak otâcimowiniwâwa: Our Grandmothers' Lives as Told in Their Own Words. Cree texts edited and translated by Freda Ahenakew & H.C. Wolfart (and also Arok Wolvengrey). Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1998. 408 pp.

Recorded first in Cree by seven grandmothers, the stories you will *hear* in this collection are best described as "spoken texts." Translated and edited by Cree-speaker and linguist, Professor Freda Ahenakew, the stories have retained their Cree idiom primarily because of Ahenakew's sensitivity to the lyricality of the Cree and how it can be retained in another language.

This is the second edition of *kôhkominawak otâcimowiniwâwa*; the first edition was published by Fifth House Publishers in 1992. The new edition, published by the Canadian Plains Research Center, is printed on more permanent paper with a new cover designed by Brian Danchuk. The cover features a reproduction of the painting "My grandmother cooking chokecherries and deer meat" by Allen Sapp. The Peter