

veterans. Nor does he put into accurate perspective the Comintern's role in the formation and direction of the International Brigades which, as Raymond Carr points out, were controlled "by humorless Communists more inclined to hunt out political dissidents than to provide creature comforts for the men."

Again, no account of the Spanish Civil War can overlook the part played by foreign military advisors. Beeching points up the infusion of men and materiel by Germany and Italy, but is largely silent about the nature and extent of Soviet assistance. Yet, until Stalin decided to abandon the Spanish cause, the large Russian military mission (which operated under the cover of false identities) was extremely influential because of its control of aircraft (Chatas and Moscas) and tanks. Equally, Comintern representatives were too often incompetent, self-righteous and vindictive in their leadership — André Marty is a classic example — while military advice, such as the late Soviet Marshal Malinovsky's mendacious claims about his part in planning the Brunete action, proved to be disastrous.

That the Canadian volunteers who fought in the Comintern's army in Spain were, as William Beeching's admirable volume confirms, brave, often selfless men, is undoubted. That they were also mishandled and, in the end, abandoned, are considerations which he, in his summary of the volunteers' place in history, fails to address. Old loyalties, it seems, even in this day of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, die hard.

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Canada and the Métis, 1869-1885, by D.N. Sprague. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988. Pp. 204.

Among the most famous episodes in Canadian history are the two confrontations between the federal government and the Métis of the west, the first at Red River in 1869-70, the second at Batoche in 1885. Despite the impressive amount of ink spilled, the impassioned argument and learned *exposés*, we are far from having heard the last word on these events. New research into the voluminous John A. Macdonald papers, facilitated by a comprehensive index unveiled by the Public Archives of Canada in 1968, and fresh examinations of the economic and social contexts of the troubles, have turned up details that promise to lead to a whole series of new interpretations. Widely accepted stereotypes are being revealed as anything but secure.

D.N. Sprague, a history professor at the University of Manitoba, has jumped into the fray on the side of the Métis, as a partisan of the Manitoba Metis Federation for which he has been working since 1978. Taking advantage of their new accessibility, he has delved deeply into the Macdonald papers, and has emerged with sufficient evidence to make a strong argument for a variation of

the conspiracy theory, that the Canadian government played a double game of apparent conciliation and hidden provocation with the Métis.

The issue, of course, is dominated by the personality of Macdonald himself. As complex as the problems he was dealing with, he is famous for his deviousness and capacity for delay. That he used these techniques to undercut the Métis position can be demonstrated up to a certain point, as Professor Sprague does with careful detail, sometimes in Macdonald's own words. But to then argue that Macdonald was set upon destroying the Métis as a people by removing their land base is to strain the evidence. The conviction remains that Macdonald was not so much concerned with undoing the Métis as he was with the creation of a nation stretching from sea to sea. If the Métis got in the way, then unfortunately they had to take the consequences. To Macdonald, that meant putting the Métis in their place, rather than destroying them. The prime minister was tough rather than heartless, and he was clear about his priorities.

The Métis, too, had their priorities, but they were not unanimously agreed upon, as Professor Sprague acknowledges. Typical of the leaders of the Red River resistance, Baptiste Tourond and André Lépine were buffalo hunters, freighters and subsistence farmers who were in "peaceful possession" of their lands but without registered title. They represented those Métis who were most vulnerable to changing circumstances as the buffalo herds diminished and settler pressures from the east increased. Other Métis leaders, such as William Dease and Pascal Breland, were much better situated; as Sprague describes it, they had lucrative ties with the Hudson's Bay Company, had registered title to their lands, and some were members of the Council of Assiniboia. While quite prepared to stand up for their political rights, they were inclined to doubt Riel's course of action, and in some cases actively opposed it. In Sprague's view, Dease and his friends were willing tools of the Canadian expansionists who were "diverting attention from the real danger, which was land loss." Riel, in taking up the cause of those who had the most to lose, accentuated this division.

It is certainly true that nineteenth-century Canada was not comfortable with the "Native fact" of the west. There were even those who were alarmed when the Métis showed signs of developing political power; in the ethos of the times, sharing power with a "savage" nation was unthinkable. The Métis, a people "in between savagery and civilization," were viewed as dubious candidates at best for active political participation in the new nation that was being forged. Macdonald may have even shared some of these perspectives; certainly he had to take them into account as he prepared to open the west for settlement. He appears to have taken for granted that large concentrations of Native peoples — whether Amerindian or Métis — were to be avoided. That his priority was white settlement is beyond question; what remains to be determined is how far he bent the rules of fair play as he set about realizing his national dream. Did he, as Sprague claims, see war as the most likely means of dislodging the Métis?

In arguing his case, Sprague concentrates on the political aspects of the confrontations. If he had widened his scope to include more of the economic and social aspects, he might well have found circumstances that would have tempered his conclusions. For example, not all dispossession was due to governmental double-dealing and entrepreneurial fraud; economic developments, such as the short-lived buffalo robe trade (active from mid-nineteenth century until the disappearance of the herds), and the growing importance of commercial agriculture at the expense of traditional subsistence farming, were major factors in Métis displacements even before the confrontations. So were the diminishing fur trade, crop failures, the effects of the railway on Métis freighting activities (a point which Sprague does touch upon), and periodic economic hard times, which were the result of the industrial boom-and-bust cycle which affected even such remote areas as the northwestern plains. In other words, war was not necessary for Macdonald to achieve his goals. For such an astute politician, that must have been evident at the time.

That said, Sprague raises a point that must be seriously considered by historians. If fraud was not the only factor in Métis dispossession, neither can its presence be discounted; the rush to open the west did not always allow for careful procedure. The extent of the fraud is now coming in for consideration in a court case that has been launched by the Manitoba Métis against the Canadian government. If there is a moral to all this, it might be in changing attitudes as to what is fair and allowable in government; the unfettered Machiavellian approach, of which Macdonald took such skillful advantage, may have had its day.

Sprague makes no bones about writing contentious history, and feeding the still flourishing debate. Canada's past is alive and kicking furiously.

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Magpie Rising: Sketches From the Great Plains, by Merrill Gilfillan. Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing Company, 1988; *Ranchers' Legacy: Alberta Essays*, by Lewis G. Thomas. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1986.

Twenty years ago now, I left Saskatchewan with my husband and small child and did not come back for five years. We went first to lower mainland British Columbia and then to Halifax. I never got to like the lower mainland, and it seemed to me that Nova Scotia, though I liked it very much, was more like another country than merely another province. I remember the day we returned to Saskatoon, pulling into the parking lot of a small mall near the outskirts of the city before we went on to our relative's house. As I sat in the car waiting for my husband, I was very happy to be back in what felt like civilization to me and, as I sat there watching all the people passing by on the sidewalk, I remember the shock I felt on suddenly seeing what seemed to me to be their uniquely Saskatchewan faces.