Behind Canada's only mass hanging; Edmonton author crafts unconventional history of flashpoint in Northwest Rebellion

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The Frog Lake Reader Myrna Kostash NeWest Press 260 pp., $26.95

In the second chapter of The Frog Lake Reader, Edmonton author Myrna Kostash describes standing at a 19th-century burial site a few hours east of the city. "Shoulder-high in grass and bramble, wild rose bushes, and aspen deadfall," she writes, the "calm beauty of the fields spread out all around belied the violence and tragedy commemorated here." The tragedy and violence at Frog Lake marked the beginning of the Northwest Rebellion and is the subject of Kostash's ninth book.

Most readers will know that the rebellion and its famous Métis leader, Louis Riel, emerged during a time of change, tension, and miscommunication between the federal government, new settlers, fur traders, indigenous and emerging cultures in a young country. Frustrated by a government that was not honouring their treaties, a struggling one-trade economy and a disappearing buffalo population, Cree and Métis people in the Prairies started to organize and protest in the 1880s--a rising tide punctuated by Chief Big Bear's refusal to sign Treaty Six in 1876.

By 1885, relations had deteriorated and rebellions had begun. Batoche and Duck Lake are two battle sites often cited in history texts. Kostash's book brings our attention to the conflict at Frog Lake settlement, northwest of modern-day Lloydminster, over Easter 1885. Big Bear's son, Imasees, and the Cree chief Wandering Spirit led a group of men in an attack on white settlers, forcing them into the Catholic church. Ten people, including Indian Agent Thomas Quinn, were killed and three others taken hostage. After surrendering to authorities, Wandering Spirit and seven of his warriors were hanged in Battleford in November of that year --11 days after Riel was hanged for treason in Regina.

The Frog Lake Reader is not a typical anthology: Kostash writes the entire book as a series of dialogues. Her voice is in conversation with both historical figures (such as Big Bear) and her contemporaries (such as novelist and exhaustive Big Bear biographer Rudy Wiebe). Excerpts of interviews that Kostash conducted with Wiebe, Sarah Carter of the University of Alberta; Heather Devine of the University of Calgary; and Blair Stonechild of the First Nations University of Canada also appear. It is particularly interesting to hear the voices of women who witnessed the buildup and aftermath of the events at Frog Lake. The narrative form is fresh, creative and culturally sensitive. Acknowledging she is but one voice among many, Kostash gives space to perspectives of the past alongside historians of today. By framing The Frog Lake Reader in this fashion she also acknowledges the importance of the oral tradition in First Nations and Métis cultures.

By collapsing time, Kostash helps us to realize how these past events still shape our present. The Frog Lake Reader is published by Edmonton-based NeWest Press and was launched here this past week in conjunction with the city's annual LitFest, which ends today. Kostash is an accomplished and prolific writer best known for her biographical writing on her Ukrainian-Canadian heritage and for her writing on Eastern European history. She says in her introduction that she conceived of The Frog Lake Reader while doing research for Reading the River, her 2007 book about the North Saskatchewan. She "learned of the only mass hanging in Canadian history, of eight First Nations men on November 27, 1885," and started keeping a file. We are fortunate that she did.
Diana Davidson teaches creative non-fiction at the University of Alberta.
Hello Martin Levin,

I enjoyed, a couple of weeks ago, the sidebar to Ashenburg’s piece about rereading Dickens; I especially enjoyed the reference to Francis Dickens. I knew nothing of or about him until I did the research for what would become my 2009 book, *The Frog Lake Reader*, when I learned of his presence at Frog Lake and Ft Pitt as commander of the small NWMP detachment. He kept a log of his time there – a very uninspired, even banal, set of jottings a lot of it about the weather – and he shows up in at least one other (unflattering) text, namely the fictionalized version of the events surrounding the Frog Lake massacre, Mel Dagg’s *The Women on the Bridge* (Thistledown 1992).

But I must correct your assertion that Dickens `led the defence of Fort Pitt during the Northwest Rebellion of 1885.` Actually, he did no such thing: in effect, he surrendered Ft Pitt and agreed to retreat to Battleford in exchange for the transfer of Ft Pitt’s inhabitants to the camp of Big Bear. Or, as the Wikipedia entry has it:

“*On April 15, 200 Cree warriors descended on Fort Pitt. They intercepted a police scouting party, killing a constable, wounding another, and captured a third. Surrounded and outnumbered, garrison commander Francis Dickens (son of famed novelist Charles Dickens) capitulated and agreed to negotiate with the attackers. Big Bear released the remaining police officers but kept the townspeople as hostages and destroyed the fort. Six days later, Inspector Dickens and his men reached safety at Battleford.***”

But even this is not quite right. Big Bear was not on the scene. The attack on Ft Pitt was the action of his war chief, the redoubtable Wandering Spirit, and the young warriors. Several of the hostages went on to write accounts of their experience in Big Bear’s/Wandering Spirit’s camp, including Bob Fulford’s great-aunt, Theresa Delaney (she is one of the fictionalized characters in *The Women on the Bridge*). Some of these accounts are strikingly in sympathy with the war aims of the Plains Cree.

Well, I say “the Cree,” but it was only Wandering Spirit near Frog Lake and Poundmaker near Battleford who were prepared to join the Metis uprising. The vast majority of the Cree chiefs along the North Saskatchewan remained stolidly neutral, arguing that they had no quarrel with the Canadian government, having signed treaty with Ottawa. Poundmaker judiciously surrendered before he could be caught but Wandering Spirit went on to the bitter end, namely execution on the gallows at Ft Battleford with 7 others.

Forgive me: I am passionate about this set of stories, having heard almost nothing of the events of 1885.
beyond the Metis resistance in spite of having spent most of my life in what had been part of the North-West Territory. And my paternal grandfather took out homestead title in 1900, a mere 15 years after the hanging of Wandering Spirit and not so far from Frog Lake (now in AB)! So I notice when parts of the history are misunderstood or incompletely understood. For instance, awhile ago in the *Literary Review of Canada*, Richard Gwyn was quoted, saying that “we do not even know the names” of those eight men who hanged together at Ft Battleford. Ah, but we do: they’re in my book because I have visited their mass grave and noted their names, in Cree as well as English, on a handsome granite stone overlooking the Battle and Saskatchewan Rivers. (The person or persons responsible for this commemoration are unacknowledged, perhaps deliberately on their own part.)