

Paper delivered at the 95th Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, University of Calgary, May 31, 2016, as part of a panel with Dr. Heather Devine and Dr. Nicole St-Onge: "Disputed Truths, Competing Myths: Revisiting the Battle of Seven Oaks After Two Hundred Years."

THE RELUCTANT HISTORIAN AT THE BATTLE OF SEVEN OAKS

In a recent interview with me, the Books columnist at the Edmonton Journal

Michael Hingston led off:

Back in the early days of her career as a non-fiction author — back during the writing of her first book, 1978's *All of Baba's Children* — Myrna Kostash made a conscious decision: She wasn't going to verify whether a given source was reliable.

Instead, Kostash decided she would stack a bunch of sources together, one on top of the other, juxtaposing perspectives and letting the overall voice of the crowd push the story forward by gradual consensus.

Or, as the Edmonton author puts it now: "My books are about what people say."

As opposed to?

"What happened."

It came as no surprise – except to the author herself – that *All of Baba's Children*, published in 1978, found an audience immediately. Its subject, the lives of the first generation of Ukrainian-Canadians as viewed from a small Ukrainian-Canadian town in Alberta, lay at the very heart of the national multiculturalism "project" then in its heyday. Amateur historians, scholars and writers had preceded me; it was timely that a third generation Ukrainian-Canadian review the history of her ethnic group, one that was indigenous to the North-West, or at least to the last one hundred years of settlement history.

But was *All of Baba's Children* history? Consider my qualifications: my university degrees were in modern languages; I neither read nor wrote Ukrainian at the time; I made no systematic effort to assemble a bibliography; I never verified my interviewees' statements; I was not "objective;" in fact I deliberately wrote with a

great big fat Attitude. I was a New Journalist not a historian, and I've been read and valued as such. And the book has never gone out of print.

(Professional historians have bemoaned the fact that writers such as I or Maggie Siggins or Pierre Berton are less than rigorous in our research or too much interested in our own rhetorical flourishes, but really it's no use complaining about us: professional historians produce precisely the texts that we writers plunder to make our own cases.)

In 2005, I published *Reading the River: A Traveler's Companion to the North Saskatchewan River*. It does exactly what it says: it narrates a history of the river through the lens of its associated literature, orature, community histories, journals, logs and memoirs, organized community by community, historic site by historic site, as though the reader were traveling downriver from Saskatchewan Crossing all the way to Lake Winnipeg.

Is Reading the River history?

One day, while visiting the Battlefords, I had almost literally stumbled on a historic site I first noted on a pamphlet issued by the town of North Battleford; it indicated places worth visiting, including "mass grave of Cree Indians." In a kind of state of shock, I followed the map, making my way down a slope of the Battle River bank to a clump of aspen trees, to the burial site of Cree war chief Wandering Spirit and seven others - a revelation that led to the publishing in 2009 of *The Frog Lake Reader*.

I had launched myself on another literary-historical adventure that first took the form of a radio documentary for CBC's *Ideas* program, "Voices From Frog Lake." And what were these voices? Ultimately, I located some sixty of them, in the same way that I had discovered the "voices" of the North Saskatchewan River: in books old and new, in Bibliographies of other writers' books, in academic essays and journals. For example: William Cameron's *Blood Red the Sun*, Ruth Buck's edited version of Edward Ahenakew's *Voices of the Plains Cree*, Richard Laurie's *Reminiscences of Early Days in Battleford*, Isabelle Little Bear John's "Memoirs of a Cree Woman" as reprinted in the Edmonton *Sunday Sun*, Bill Gallaher's novelization, *The Frog Lake*

***Massacre*, Blair Stonechild's and Bill Waiser's *Loyal Till Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion*, and Walter Hildebrandt's poems in the collection, *Sightings*.**

None of these texts is obscure but in assembling them and ordering them in a polyphonic chronology of the events of 1885 I also put them in a *disputatious* relationship to each other so as to make a point: that an evolving historiography goes on producing versions and variants, for instance, most recently, Garry Radison's *Defending Frog Lake: An Analysis of the Frog Lake Massacre* (2015), Laurie Graham's *Settler Education*, poems published this year, and Paul Zits's *Massacre Street*, poems published in 2013.

I was also personally motivated to include as many Indigenous "voices" as I could find to make the point to my own community of settler Ukrainian –Canadians. Only fifteen years separated the hanging of Wandering Spirit in 1885 and my *dido* Kostash's filing for homestead near Vegreville, not so very far from Frog Lake, in 1900. Only fifteen years, but it might as well have been a millennium for all the awareness that my grandparents had of it.

But was the *Frog Lake Reader* history? Not having heard a single word in response to *The Frog Lake Reader* from the professional historians, I can't say. But I have heard from readers both hostile and grateful, so there is still something at stake in the retelling of this particular set of events, whatever your point of view.

This brings me to the third such compilation, *The Battle of Seven Oaks Reader*, very newly published by NeWest Press, also the publishers of the *Frog lake Reader*. It couldn't be timelier, as the 200th anniversary of the Battle will be commemorated June 19, 2016. I cannot recall what drew me to the history of this event, about which I knew precisely nothing when I first learned of it; but perhaps that is the point of both these Readers: why didn't I, a lifelong western Canadian, know about what happened at Frog Lake and Seven Oaks? I was ashamed of myself and set out to find out. But I didn't take any one source's word for it.

Seven Oaks is twice as big a book as *Frog Lake*. This may be a result of the fact that there are 200 years' worth of texts and other materials that have accumulated, albeit sporadically, but it also reflects my increased comfort with my method. I

broadened the scope of my chronicle so that, for instance, I included a text by the 19th century French poet, Chateaubriand, in which he refers to a "domestic conflict, horrid in its details, that took place amongst the frozen wildernesses of Hudson Bay." I remembered a Letter to the Editor of the London Review of Books in which the Scottish writer, David Craig, cites interviews he had done with direct descendants of the crofters evicted during the Highland Clearances "who survived by licking oatmeal dust from the floor after their dwellings had been nailed up." Remembering from the 1970s that the activist Duke Redbird was a Metis, I tracked down his 1980 publication, *We Are Metis: A Metis View of the Development of a Native Canadian People*. On a visit to Poland I met a German historian, Hartmut Lutz, who sent me a copy of his essay, "Inventing Canada's Aboriginal Peoples: Metis Moving From Invisibility to International Interaction." A casual conversation at a family reunion led me to the Reginald Buller essay, "From a Single Seed: Tracing the Marquis wheat success story in Canada to its roots in the Ukraine."

As well, the number of helpful sites on the Web has proliferated since I worked on Frog Lake – from *metisnation.ca* to *electricscotland.com* to *redriverancestry.ca*; not to mention the availability of digitized books such as Louis Aubrey Woods' *The Red River Colony: A Chronicle of the Beginnings of Manitoba* and Lord Selkirk's *On the Civilization of the Indians in British America* available through that amazing resource, *peel.library.ualberta.ca*. Doing Google searches for subtopics such as French-language poetry about Seven Oaks and Supreme Court decisions about Metis identity yielded the poetry of Metis Paul Savoie of St-Boniface and a personal essay in Briarpatch magazine by the young Metis novelist, Tara Gereaux of Regina recently shortlisted with her first novel, *Size of a Fist*, at the Saskatchewan Book Awards.

As with Frog Lake, I made a particular effort to include *literary* sources – Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* ventriloquizes both Piper Gunn from the Highlands and Pierre Falcon from Red River. Metis singer-song writer Don Freed has written a ballad, "Bittersweet Oaks." Metis poet Greg Scofield has evoked his Red River forebears, especially women, in his collection, *Singing Home the Bones*. Novelist Don Gillmor describes his search for Highland roots, in his memoir, *The Desire of*

***Every Living Thing.* I was delighted to come across the mass market paperback historical fiction by Nova Scotian Alfred Silver, *Red River Story.* And so on. *The Seven Oaks Reader* has 14 pages of small-font bibliography.**

I hope that you now an impression of my purpose: I have not sought to establish incontrovertible evidence and truths about events but to bring into association with each other tales, testimonies and texts that refer to the same historical events and characters but each from its own point of view and genre. This is equally true of the *Frog Lake Reader.* But in 1885 there were sources of the stories that did not exist in 1816 and brought an immediacy to the narration that can be quite difficult to arouse from documents that date to the 1820s in Rupert's Land. In the North-West Territory of 1885 we already have newspapermen, soldiers, missionaries, Indian Agents, agricultural instructors, and photographers. By contrast, Red River country, before European settlement in 1812 was, to quote Jack Bumsted from an interview with me: "*terra incognita*, it is land in which there are Aborigines, the beginnings of a mixed-blood society, a handful of fur traders. No maps and no boundaries. There was nothing out here. I have to keep repeating that. There is no government, there is no authority out here."

Nevertheless, the core of the project – and it could not be otherwise – were the histories. The writers begin with the nonprofessional Alexander Begg, Donald Gunn, J.J. Hargrave, Joseph Tassé and Alexander Ross, proceed through the prolific George Bryce, Charles Napier Bell, R.G. MacBeth, Auguste Trémaudan, and Arthur Morton, until we get to the familiar figures of Marcel Giraud, W.L. Morton, George F.G. Stanley, George Woodcock, and professor emeritus Jack Bumsted; and, along the way the popular historians, Vera Kelsey, Marjorie Campbell, J.G. MacGregor, Grant MacEwan, Howard Adams and Douglas Hill. Working now are the educators Fred Shore, Lawrie Barkwell, Antoine Lussier, Gordon Goldsborough, Marcia Lalonde and the revisionist historians Jennifer Brown, Heather Devine, Lyle Dick, Gerhard Ens and Emma LaRocque. Also, hot off the press in Scotland comes James Hunter's *Set Adrift Upon the World: The Sutherland Clearances*. According to Amazon, "his researches took him to archives in Scotland, England and Canada, to the now deserted straths of Sutherland, to the frozen shores of Hudson Bay." From what I've read of two chapters he sent me –of the Sutherlanders' journey to the Selkirk settlement 1813-1814 – Hunter has done just what I count on historians to do: he sat down to read the letter of Abel Edwards to J. Charles, 30 March 1814; aka endnote item BCA A/B/20/C47E, and so now I know that one contingent of colonists set off from Fort Churchill to walk to York Factory on Wednesday, April 6.

I am a nonfiction writer who depends on the primary source research of the professional historians – those of you who haunt the archives, the letters and records and memorabilia – and your publications in order to plunder them for my own purposes. Over the course of two centuries, the historians themselves contribute to these contending narratives, as anyone who has read Lyle Dick's seminal essay, "The Seven Oaks Incident and the Construction of a Historical Tradition" will appreciate. In the case of *Seven Oaks*, that purpose was to bring as many "voices" and stories into the narrative of the Fur Trade Wars, the Pemmican Declaration, the Selkirk settlements, the Battle itself, the legal aftermath, and the legacies among the Metis people and the settler descendants

in order to display for today's reader the extraordinary diversity and plurality of story-telling among our Canadian communities as we turn again and again to the past with the question: What happened?

Finally, as I wrote in my author's Preface, "the *Reader* is published in the wake of the Report from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is my and the publisher's hope that it will find favour among Canadian readers generally and educators specifically who are called upon by the Commission to "build student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect." It is in that spirit that it is offered to the public.

©Myrna Kostash May 31, 2016