

By Rob Alexander - Rocky Mountain Outlook

Alberta Choice Awards nominees to share work

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Willock & Sax is hosting two of the five finalists in the Alberta Reader's Choice Award for an afternoon of history and adventure this weekend.

Myrna Kostash, author of a Frog Lake Reader, and Michael Murtha, co-editor of The Forgotten Explorer, will be at Willock & Sax Saturday (May 8) from 2-4 p.m.

Readings begin at 2:30 p.m.

Published by NeWest Press, the Frog Lake Reader explores the events surrounding the Frog Lake massacre of 1885 that saw Cree war chief Wandering Spirit and his warriors rise up against a group of settlers, killing nine and taking another three hostage.

Kostash used a range of voices and sources, including eyewitness accounts, journals, memoirs, contemporary fiction and interviews with four Alberta historians.

The Frog Lake Massacre, which occurred at Frog Lake east of Edmonton near the Saskatchewan border, is often overshadowed by the Northwest Rebellion led by Louise Riel in 1885.

Kostash said recently the Frog Lake Reader does not take a side in the events that led to the mass hanging of six Cree warriors, including Wandering Spirit.

She instead sees herself as the editor or composer, presenting various viewpoints without laying blame or pointing fingers.

As she presents the many voices in the Frog Lake Reader, Kostash also explores the many contradictions presented by the different accounts of the history and those raised between written and oral traditions, as well.

"You can see that very poignantly; when I ask the question of the four informants that I string through the book – Rudy Wiebe, Heather Devine, Sarah Carter and Blair Stonechild – what do we call it if we don't like the word massacre anymore?" she said, adding no one can decide what to call it or how to describe the events.

"From a creative writer's point of view, I'm just as fascinated as the falsehoods that people say or what they distort or what they don't say," she said.

Kostash, the author of nine books, added she was inclined to call it a war crime.

“The Cree declared themselves on the warpath at Frog Lake so we should take them on their word. We should take them seriously. They weren’t just criminals and thugs, they were military figures if you like and when you shoot unarmed civilians you are committing a war crime, as we know from Bosnia,” she said.

But there is no consensus of how to commemorate the Cree warriors who were hanged and buried together in a mass grave near Battleford.

“Is this an act of shame to the communities that their warriors were hanged? Or was it a wake up call about misuse of violence?”

As Kostash worked through the history and the numerous voices – both modern and historical – she attempted to keep her voice to a minimum and let the drama and emotion of the Frog Lake Massacre speak for itself.

“Due to the sheer poignancy of the material as I started to research the context of the massacre, in the disappearance of the buffalo, the arrival of the police and the humiliation and the terror, I was overwhelmed by grief by this history because it took place on the land that I live on.”

Murtha, meanwhile, will present *The Forgotten Explorer: Samuel Prescott Fay’s 1914 Expedition to the Northern Rockies*, co-edited with Charles Helm and published by Rocky Mountain Books.

During his 1,200-km journey through the Northern Rockies, Fay kept a detailed daily journal that is today held at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. According to Rocky Mountain Books, this “book represents aspects of western Canadian history in its infancy”.

The Forgotten Explorer reminds readers how the Rocky Mountains were once a wild, unknown landscape.

Murtha is a planner for Banff National Park.

The Alberta Reader’s Choice Award (ARC) is an annual award, worth \$10,000, for adult fiction and narrative non-fiction titles. The winner will be announced on May 14 at the ARC gala.