

WEST WORD #6

Research by Serendipity

“It doesn’t look good for the people of Montana if they will sit and see a lot of women and children starve to death in this kind of weather,” wrote famed Montanan artist Charlie Russell some thirty years after the Riel rebellion of 1885 failed in Saskatchewan River country north of the line. A rebel band of Cree Indians had fled Canada on the heels of Louis Riel’s Metis supporters rather than surrender to Canadian military, and had now become destitute after wandering homeless in Montana from reservation to reservation. “Lots of people seem to think,” Russell continued, in a pitch for a subscription list of those willing to help, “that the Indians are not human beings at all and have no feelings...They are perfectly willing to let them die of hunger and cold without lifting a hand.” A couple of entrepreneurs from Helena had made a bit of money running Montana’s Wildest West Show featuring “the only people in the U.S. without a country,” but in 1916 even that line of business shut down when Congress established the Rocky Boy reservation south of Havre on U.S. Highway 87 on surplus military reserve land and settled the hapless Canadians there.

All this I learned from *A Traveler’s Companion to Montana History*, a book I had forgotten I owned until I recently trawled through my bookshelves looking for material for my project-in-progress, *A Reader’s Companion to the Saskatchewan River* (there really is no such thing as an original idea!).

What had led me back into Montana history was the link between those homeless Cree and the fate of their brothers who were hanged at Ft Battleford (where the Battle River joins the North Saskatchewan) in the grim winter of 1885, for they had all had been members of the band of Cree chief Big Bear. In spite of the old man’s efforts to keep his Cree away from the violence of the Metis uprising, several young men and Big Bear’s own son, Imasees, had been swept up into the turbulence roiling the North-West in 1885 - most sensationally in the massacre of nine white and mixed-blood men at the settlement of Frog Lake (near today’s Elk Point in north-eastern Alberta). Imasees, Little Poplar and Lucky Man, with their extended families, got away to Montana, but Wandering Spirit and seven companions died on the scaffold in a mass hanging, victims of “judicial murder,” according to one historian of the event (who does not mention the Frog Lake murders): “Every member of the Indian nation heard the death-rattle of the eight heroes who died at the end of the colonizer’s rope and they went quietly back to their compounds, obediently submitting themselves to their oppressors.” The writer, the late Howard Adams, was a Metis militant and Marxist scholar from Saskatchewan, and he is here underscoring the historic defeat of the Plains Indians who by this time had been herded into reserves. Although his solidarity with the First Nations is impressive, it is also clear that he is quietly comparing their obedient submission “to their oppressors” to the fact of Metis resistance.

Adams wrote *Prison of Grass: Canada From the Native Point of View* in 1975, and that's when I read it, then filed it away on my bookshelves among my growing library of western Canadiana (I had recently returned to live here). I had forgotten that I had already encountered the story of the Battleford executions when I recently read the widely-admired *Loyal Till Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion*, by Saskatchewanians Blair Stonechild and Bill Waiser. For these two historians, the scene at the gallows has also left a deep imprint - the prisoners in shackles, their death song, the policemen ringing the scaffold, the huddle of families from the reserves and the towns, the awful silence - as they reconstruct the "quiet horror" of the assembled Indians who watched "as the men dropped to their doom and then silently moved off once the bodies had been placed in the coffins."

Like Adams, they evoke the silence of the Indian witnesses but, where in Adams this was seen as submissiveness, in Stonechild and Waiser it is recalled as a kind of preparation of collective memory that will be passed on in spite of the colonizers' best efforts to squelch it: "But to this day, the executions have remained a numbing event, compared to an old scar on the soul of a people....Don Chatsis, a descendant of one of the warriors, said that he often heard the elders speak of the bravery of the condemned men, how they all sang on the platform in the face of death." And, in spite of their scholarly objectivity, a note of resentment creeps in, here and there, about the popular "fascination" with the fate of the Metis leader, Louis Riel, and his violent death on the Regina gallows, a fascination that has not extended, the authors argue, to the eight warriors who died together at Ft Battleford a mere eleven days later.

In fact, this reader gets the feeling that, from their point of view, the Metis got the Indians into a whole lot of trouble not only with their "armed showdown" against the Canadian state whose effects spilled over onto individual Indians but also with the perfect excuse their "showdown" provided the Department of Indian Affairs in its strategy of "abject subordination" of the First Nations and the treaties they had signed in good faith. "The Indians had stood staunchly by the Queen during the rebellion, and yet in the aftermath, the Canadian government had treated them as outlaws in their own country." Many of those Indians who did fight in the trenches of Batoche, write Stonechild and Waiser, were there against their own will. Metis historian Adams comes to a very different conclusion: "If the struggles of the Indians in the 1885 uprising had been co-ordinated with the halfbreed movement," he speculated, their combined forces may well have overwhelmed the raw Canadian troops. As it was, "the Indians were not formally organized for a systematic struggle against the federal government."

Adams concludes his historical account of the events of 1885 with Riel's hanging; Stonechild and Waiser follow the story down into Montana, the deprivation awaiting most of the refugees, and the generation after them. "The last Plains Indians to arrive [in Montana]," I read now in a tourist guidebook to Montana, "were the Chippewas and Crees of Algonquin heritage, and the Metis or 'mixed Bloods' which represent a racial mixture of Cree, Assiniboine, Chippewa, and French," for all the world describing a casual multicultural walkabout. Elsewhere the Metis are described as "landless," without

explanation, and there is no entry in the Index for St Peter's, the centre of Roman Catholic native missions in Montana from which Louis Riel was persuaded by a delegation of Saskatchewan country Metis to return to Canada and fight.

Of the Metis, the gentleman-adventurer The Earl of Southesk wrote sometime in the 1860s in Saskatchewan country, "They are a fine race, tall, straight, well-proportioned, lightly formed but strong and extremely active and enduring." They were the *voyageurs* employed by the fur trade companies who could travel fifty to sixty miles a day on foot, to say nothing of what they could do in a canoe. "Their chests, shoulders and waists are symmetrical shape so seldom found among the broad-waisted, short-necked English or the flat-chested, long-necked Scotch." The Earl of Southesk, we are told by writer Marjorie Wilkins Campbell in her 1950 book, *The Saskatchewan*, which I found in a used book store in Edmonton, was "a fine gentleman, considerate of the men he engaged in the country, and a keen sport." While he scribbled in the firelight of his prairie camp, the men and women of the fur trade got on with business. Back in the fall of 1784, for instance, the trader Patrick Small at the wintering post constructed by Thomas Frobisher and Louis Primeau on the shore of Lac Ile-a-la-Crosse toward Athabasca country, or Sakitawak, journeyed among the camps of the Chipewyans and Crees, buying pelts. "September 1st, 1785, there was born unto Patrick Small and his unknown wife, a girl child. Perhaps because of some remembrances of a home in a different land, Patrick named her Charlotte....Sakitawak has now known the union of two peoples. Already a 'new nation' is in the making." A hundred years later that new nation will go to war.

I read about the girlchild, Charlotte, mother of the nation, in the Bi-Centennial publication of Ile-a-la-Crosse/Sakitawak 1776-1976, published by the community's Bi-Centennial Committee in 1977. Louis Riel's sister, Sara, the Grey Nun, first Metis to enter that order, is buried in Ile-a-la-Crosse. Far from her Red River home, she laboured at the mission in the far North-West, and survived a near-fatal hemorrhage of the lungs in the winter of 1872. "Death hovered over Sister Sara," the Bi-Centennial publication informs me. However, her priest prayed to his patron saint for intercession, and "at that very moment Sara rose from her deathbed a cured person." It was a miracle. Am I surprised? Not a bit. In summer 2002 an apparition of the Virgin Mary had appeared glowing in the window panes of a greenhouse in Ile-a-la-Crosse. "Anyone who visits Ile-a-la-Crosse cannot deny the unmistakable scent of live roses although the greenhouse was only used for growing tomatoes." I read that in an issue of *The Prairie Messenger*, a newspaper of Roman Catholic news and views, published at St Peter's Abbey in Muenster, Saskatchewan. But that's another story, and another, utterly serendipitous bibliography.

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August 18/03