

THE RELUCTANT HISTORIAN: THE WRITER READS THE NORTH-WEST

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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, or lack of them: my university degrees were in modern languages; I neither read nor wrote Ukrainian; 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 red and valued as such. (Professional historians bemoan 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.) For these reasons I would not rewrite *All of Baba's Children* even to get things "right" the second time around: it was a book of its time.

For the next 23 years I picked no western Canadian historical subject for my books. I wrote about the era of the 1960s in Canada, about teenage girls across the country, about the next generation of Canadians, and a lot about eastern Europe, even though I was living in Edmonton and all around me were artists of regionalism, in literature, in visual arts, in film and theatre.

Then, in 2005, I published *Reading the River: A Traveler's Companion to the North Saskatchewan River*, followed in quick succession by a CBC radio documentary, "Voices From Frog Lake," the book, *Frog Lake Reader*, in 2009, and, last Fall, a play based on characters from the Frog Lake story. This Spring CBC radio's documentary program, *Ideas*, will broadcast my script, "Voices From Seven Oaks."

What drew me back to the north-west? Oddly, it was a book, about the Danube River, with the subtitle, *A Journey through the Landscape, History, and Culture of Central Europe*. Of course, the Danube is a very old river and it passes through a multitude of countries but nevertheless I got to wondering: could I

write about a *Canadian* river the same way, through the lens of its literature, its orature, its community histories, its memoirs? And so I began the process of answering my own challenge: I ransacked libraries and used book stores, museums and historic site bookshops, and I sent out invitations to submit work, looking for what writers of all descriptions, who had preceded me on this journey, had written, about the most impressive – even magisterial – and unexamined (by me) river I knew, the North Saskatchewan. And then I organized the material 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? I would answer that it is a kind of history, in that it brings together a very broad assortment of historical and current texts – explorers' and missionaries' journals, military memoirs, settlers' reminiscences, local histories, kayakers' blogs, poetry – under the general topic of the North Saskatchewan River; the cumulative effect is of a narrative of events that begins in the cosmology of the First Nations and ends, for the time being, in a consideration of the immediate ecological future of the river. Between those two points the reader or traveler has visited Rocky Mountain House, Edmonton, Fort Pitt, the Forks, Nipawin, and Grand Rapids, as they have been charted in literature.

Whatever it is called, the book represents to me a crash course in my own regional history of the First Nations, the fur trade, settlement, and urbanization. It was exhilarating as I discovered new river places (the river's source as seen from Parker Ridge, the Forks where the South and the North flow together), new human places (Kootenay Plain, Borden Bridge, Ft George & Buckingham House), and pursued questions that my travel along the river raised: where exactly was that place Alexander Henry the Younger called Terre Blanche? Just how many sites did Fort Edmonton have? Not to mention all the different places casually referred to as "The Forks"? How did the river flow before all the dams were thrown across it? This river venture through literature gave me a sense of attachment to the physical waterway I had never felt as a city girl, for whom the North Saskatchewan represented something you had to cross over, a kind of obstacle in the way of smooth-flowing *traffic*. Now I stand in awe of its grand sweep through its magnificent valley, paying homage to what poet Glen Sorestad calls its "weight of time, its lunar pull" as it moves toward the sea.

Because of the of role the North Saskatchewan as the waterway for the fur trade into the Canadian interior, the fur companies built their posts and forts along it, as later did the North West Mounted Police. I had already come across literature written from or about these posts, so it was important to visit the Historic Sites themselves, an itinerary that took me from Rocky

Mountain House to Fort Saskatchewan, to Fort George and Buckingham House, to Fort Carlton and Prince Albert. Included in this itinerary was a visit to Fort Battleford. And it was in Battleford that I first became aware of an historical event in the Canadian North-West that has had a profound impact on me: the mass hanging of eight Cree and Assiniboine warriors at Fort Battleford on November 27, 1885, and their burial in a common grave near the Fort. Although the website of the Fort Battleford National Historic Site mentions the trials and hanging of the men accused of the killings at Frog Lake in April 1885, no mention is made of their grave, which I only learned about from a pamphlet issued by the town of North Battleford: a map of the two Battlefords indicating things worth visiting, including “mass grave of Cree Indians.”

I found it by following the map, making my way down the bank of the Battle River below the car park of the municipal camping grounds. You cannot readily see it from the top – it emerges from a clump of aspen bush – but once in view it makes a powerful impression, its tipi poles rising up against a blue sky, and circling the black granite headstone with the names of the dead inscribed there in Cree as well as English. There is a plywood plaque that recounts the events known as the Frog Lake Massacre, but there is no author.

And so I made my way backwards- as it were – from this site and this story, to Frog Lake Historic Site and the graves of some of the men killed there by the warriors of Cree chief Big Bear (the two priests' remains were eventually reburied in St Albert and the body of Thomas Quinn, the first victim of the Massacre, was never recovered, in fact apparently not even claimed), then to Fort Pitt and the story of the McLean family taken as hostages into the camp of the war chief, Wandering Spirit , then to Frenchman Butte and the story of the inconclusive Battle of Frenchman Butte, and to Steele's Narrows, where the Cree were finally overcome by the militias sent in pursuit of Big Bear's band. The historical evidence of all these events was barely discernible in the landscape but the narrative was vivid nevertheless, perhaps because I had been only vaguely aware of it and here it was laid out before me in the shape of a creek bed and a ravine, a line of trees and a slope of river bank, and of course in a cemetery and a mass grave.

I realized I was launched on another literary-historical adventure that would first take 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*.

There was a sense of adventure here too – the sweep and panorama of a river rendered metaphorically as the sweep and panorama of a historical narrative. But this time it was also an experience of immense anguish. The voices were inside my head, not just as arguments, propositions and hypotheses, but as emotions and reflections and dreams that distressed me terribly: voices of despair, bewilderment, rage, hopelessness, terror, and prayer; and those other voices, of contempt, condescension fecklessness, judgement, boastfulness and self-righteousness. I'm talking about the voices of the Plains Cree in the 1870s and 1880s that emerge from the cacophony of non-Aboriginal voices, of armies and courts, newspapers, churches and industrial schools, that triumph over the historical narrative as the Cree sickened and died.

And so *The Frog Lake Reader* came into being, thanks to the NeWest Press, as fine a book as I've ever done.

But is it history?

Not having heard a single word 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. It is certainly a *literary* history, a gathering together of all the ways in which men and women have transcribed themselves into this woeful story – memoir, reportage, reminiscence, poetry, fiction. But we should ask whether there can be *History* when every generation produces new texts and rereads old ones or unearths undiscovered or neglected ones (and there is some of each type in the *Reader*); perhaps there are only *histories*, some succeeding, some overlapping, and some co-existing with each other. So we have the sympathetic accounts that have overtaken the versions of Frog Lake told in a triumphalist, colonialist voice; and we have the memoirs that follow on the heels of an earlier generation's recollection, keeping the story going; and we have the narratives that sit side by side, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, male and female, plain-spoken and sophisticated, documented and imagined, not cancelling each other out but filling in the gaps and silences.

“Why did you do *The Frog Lake Reader*? “ I was asked by a young Aboriginal woman at the launch of the book in October 2009. Even a few months earlier

I would not have been able to answer her truthfully, or, rather, perceptively. I would have simply said, “I wrote this book because it tells a story we know too little about and we should know.” But, as I answered the young woman, every writer starts out with her “apparent subject,” what the project seems to be about: this is a book about the Frog Lake Massacre. But underneath this apparent subject lurks the “deep subject,” the one that moves it along, lying in wait in the subconscious, waiting for the moment when the writer finally “gets” it. This is the big “ah ha!” moment in creativity and it is not always guaranteed to happen. “I know why I’m telling *you* this,” says the writer, “but what has it go to do with *me*?”

Luckily, I had my “ah ha” moment with the *Frog Lake Reader*. As I mentioned, putting it together was a harrowing experience. I experienced a tumult of emotions I didn’t know I had. It isn’t as though I didn’t know the broad outlines of the history of First Nations/Canadian relations: the fur trade, the smallpox epidemics, the disappearance of the buffalo, famine and starvation, the Treaties, the Riel Rebellion, the establishment of the reserves, the building of the CPR, the arrival of permanent White settlers, the residential schools and the efforts to eradicate “heathen” culture. Written in a sequence like this, I am impressed by how long and complex and violent this intertwined history is. But two years of reading the deeply personal and dramatic and vivid voices of people directly affected by the Frog Lake

events, sympathetic and hostile, detached and implicated, defensive and accusatory, White, Cree and Métis, I was educated in a way I did not anticipate. In reading individual accounts of suffering and injustice, especially that of the Cree people at the hands of White authority, I was smitten by grief, anguish, despair, outrage. And by a measure of guilt that I, as a socially-conscious Ukrainian-Canadian writer, had never said or written as much in public.

But what finally emerged from my subconscious was a very simple fact: that 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.

You might ask: Why should a Ukrainian-Canadian have anything particular to say about these matters? I would answer that it is very basic, very fundamental: my forebears to western Canada settled on what had been sovereign Indian land but the only story we have been pleased to tell, over and over again, is that triumphalist narrative of our back-breaking labour on "free lands," reaping crops from "virgin" soil, which the government in Ottawa "gave" to us, and on which we built our fences and our barns, our schools and our post offices, our churches and our graveyards, naming them

all, as well as the creeks and lakes and ravines, in our own language, with our own ancestral memory and our New World desires, as though they had been unnamed before we got here, as though stories had not already been told for generations about the heroes and gods who walked this same land, as though Native ancestors' bones had not already been committed for millennia to this very earth that they and now we love and call Mother.

I'm not done with Frog Lake, however. You may have noticed that the two books under discussion here, *Reading the River* and *The Frog Lake Reader*, were not *written* by me. I've been an editor and anthologist, organizing and contextualizing other people's writing, as though sidling up to the subject instead of speaking in my own voice. But now that I know what's driving me, I have committed myself to write something from my own imagination and spirit, namely a play, which has already had a staged reading last November at Edmonton's Festival of Ideas. It features two characters from the Frog Lake story, war chief Wandering Spirit and his sixteen-year-old mixed-blood hostage Eliza McLean, who are thrown together in the vortex of violence of 1885, he to hang on the gallows and she to vanish from history. The play is called *The Gallows Is Also a Tree* , and with it I've finally transcribed myself into history – with a small “h.”

Myrna Kostash

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