

Myrna Kostash

***THE SEVEN OAKS READER***  
(EXCERPTS)<sup>1</sup>

**From the *Preface* by Myrna Kostash**

. . . *The Seven Oaks Reader* gathers together a wide diversity of texts with differing perspectives to narrate a controversial historic event, in this case the “battle” between armed settlers and armed Métis buffalo hunters on 19 June 1816 at The Forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers in what is now Winnipeg. The death of twenty-one settlers and one Métis led to no conclusive judicial outcome but has reverberated down through the generations of descendants of both communities as a formative event in their history in western Canada. As a born and bred western Canadian who has lived most of her life in Alberta, I was nevertheless ignorant of this “legacy” incident and so I set out to find as many sources for its telling as I could.

More than a textbook or anthology of voices, the *Reader* works as a drama of interplaying, sometimes contradictory, often contrapuntal narratives. Given that some of the narrative dates to 1816 and that the historians themselves began publishing histories of Manitoba as far back as the 1850s, it is unsurprising that, from an editorial point of view, there are inconsistencies and even infelicities of word usage and spelling. So, one reads of both the Hudson Bay Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company, of North-Westerns and Nor’Westerns (agents and employees of the North West Company), of Bois Brules and Bois-Brûlés, of mixed bloods and Mixed Bloods, of Metis and Métis, of Miles Macdonell and Miles MacDonnell. There are discrepancies among accounts of dates, numbers, and place names. Certain words and characterizations, now found offensive, were in common circulation as male Euro-Canadian voices long dominated the telling of this tale. But the last half-

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<sup>1</sup> The following excerpts are taken from Myrna Kostash’s *The Seven Oaks Reader* (fwd. Heather Devine), which was published by NeWest Press in Edmonton in 2016. These excerpts are presented here with the author’s permission.

century has introduced a welcome chorus of new voices from among Aboriginal and female narrators.

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.

### **From the *Foreword* by Dr Heather Devine**

*The Battle of Seven Oaks . . . or, How My Ancestral Uncle Got Arrested, and How My 5th Great Grandfather Lied on the Witness Stand to Get Him Out of Trouble*

As a descendant of some of the participants in this notorious event, *and* as a professional historian of Canadian Native history, I ask myself what approach I should take to welcoming the reader to this most recent, and truly unique, narrative of the Seven Oaks saga.

One of my ancestral fifth – great – grandfathers was a Canadien freeman named Antoine Peltier dit Assiniboine. Apparently in the service of the North West Company during the Seven Oaks crisis, he married a Native woman, Marguerite Sauteaux, *à la façon du pays*. Her son, Pierre "Bostonnais" Pangman, grew to be one of the Métis 'chefs' at Red River, and was arrested for his activities against the Hudson's Bay Company. Step-father Antoine Peltier dit Assiniboine was called as a witness in the Selkirk Trials, and I have read the trial transcripts prompting me to carry out a more detailed contextual study of the Battle of Seven Oaks, with particular emphasis on the familial links among the participants.

. . . few historiographical analyses reflect on the long-term, modern-day, consequences of historical events except in a very abstract and general fashion. But the *Seven Oaks Reader* is also about private family tragedy and community decline, and the oral stories and songs shared and preserved by Métis people in the confines of their communities. One discovers, very quickly, that the memories – and the wounds – of this event are still fresh.

. . .

But, as one learns quickly after even a cursory examination of the extensive historiography of this conflict, just about everyone – the participants, the contemporary observers resident in Red River, the partisans of both the Hudson's Bay and North West companies, and the descendants of the Métis and AngloScots combatants – have strong opinions on the subject.

The modern-day professional historians who have sifted through those surviving accounts, and written their own assessments of Seven Oaks over the last two hundred years, also have convincing and intense perspectives on these events. These scholarly writings feature numerous facts that have been dutifully unearthed, carefully analyzed, and logically presented. But they are reconstructions of historical events. And they have their own implicit biases. Scholars are as shaped by regional, class, and racial biases as other writers might be, except that they are possibly more adept at obscuring their partisanship by the methodological tools at their disposal. . . .

### From Chapter 8 “The Historians”

**Joseph E. Martin, Management consultant & historian:** When I spoke to the Manitoba Historical Society twenty-five years ago [in 1940] the term “battle” was used. I vividly remember giving the lecture at the annual meeting of the Society, recognizing that there were a lot of sensitivities in the room, and being as careful as I’ve ever been in a public address. I thought I’d done a marvellous job of being absolutely neutral. I received very good, polite applause but at the end of the evening Anne Henderson, President of the Lord Selkirk Society, came up to me, eyes blazing, and said: “How could you Joe?” I said: “How could I what . . .?” She said: “You know it wasn’t a battle . . . you know it was a massacre . . . how could you have called it a battle?”

**MK:** It would be the task of historians writing after 1970 to go beyond the “civilized-primitive debate,” historians such as Jennifer Brown and Sylvia van Kirk who introduced the history of women and children in the fur trade, or Gerhard Ens, who, like sociologist Ron Bourgeault, argues for a Métis identity “not defined by biology, blood, or religion, but rather by the economic and social niche they carved out for themselves within the fur trade” or Emma LaRocque who has challenged historians to “demythologize this myth” of the dichotomy of civilization/savagery by exposing how actively involved the Red River Métis were in commerce, transportation, food supplies, and linguistics or Lyle Dick’s comprehensive review of how the historians have written about the Battle of Seven Oaks in particular.

**Lyle Dick (historian and author) interview:** The Battle of Seven Oaks as a *massacre* serves the foundational myth of Anglo-Canadians in the west because it offers an opportunity to present the Métis as violent, lacking in self-control, unruly, lawless. All of those things which could be used to discredit their claim to western lands. This is the period when western

lands are being surveyed, parcelled off and granted to homesteaders, sold by the cpr to settlers. So this was a period when land was very much an issue of contention. Why indeed did we have two resistances led by the Métis in western Canada in 1870 and 1885? Land was a central component of both those armed conflicts and I think it's important to remind ourselves of that.

**Métis Nation of Ontario, Region 4:** The “Battle of Seven Oaks” marks the birth of the Métis Nation. Historians have chosen to interpret this particular battle in a negative light, showing the Métis as the aggressors contrary to the evidence. Historians of the past have chosen to show the Métis as savages, and therefore as the ones who fired the first shot and afterwards mutilating the bodies. . . .

Many people today still believe that the Métis “massacred” the settlers in a savage manner and that ultimately the battle was the fault of the Métis because they fired the first shot even when there is evidence to the contrary. We as Métis people need to start writing our own history and reviewing past historical writings to ensure the truth is put forward. By understanding our past we can become stronger in the future.

**Lyle Dick interview:** Some of these important events relating to the history of western Canada and particularly relating to the Métis community such as Seven Oaks in 1816, the Northwest resistance of 1870, and the second Northwest Resistance of 1885 are not over and done with. They may have happened in the past but they have not yet been concluded in terms of the issues revealed: in these economic justice and opportunities to participate fully in western Canadian and Canadian society in general. For Anglo western Canadians the issues that resonate would include communities' desire to get more in touch with their past. If people realize that some of our foundations of our understanding of the past are built on myth, I like to think they would want to get a bit closer to their history so that they're not dealing so much with myths as they're dealing with concrete realities. And I think that would be better for everyone.

**Duke Redbird (Métis poet, journalist and activist):** Most white historians have assumed that possessiveness is a primary motivator, the territorial imperative, if you will. Land, to the white man, was to be possessed. . . . The Metis had developed a way of life that was co-operative rather than competitive . . . In other words, dissolution of conflict – not dominance in conflict – was the goal . . . A basic idea of this book [*We Are Metis*] is that the Metis were indeed civilized and that that civilization was undermined, both consciously and otherwise by both Europeans and

Canadians . . . This is the challenge to white-biased history, that there was a civilization of Metis people that has not been destroyed, but rather exists today, not only among the Metis but in the mind of every Canadian whose ancestors were in North America when Riel first said, “We are Metis.”

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**Myrna Kostash** is an acclaimed Canadian author of award-winning books of literary and creative non-fiction, for example, *All of Baba's Children* (1977), the classic of multicultural literature, or *Bloodlines: A Journey Into Eastern Europe* (1993); *The Doomed Bridegroom: A Memoir* (1998); *The Frog Lake Reader* (2009); and *Prodigal Daughter: A Journey to Byzantium* (2010). Her latest, just recently published book, *The Seven Oaks Reader* (2016), has been well-received at literary festivals and in reviews. Kostash's literary achievements and commitment to writing and scholarship have been recognized and awarded prizes such as the Canadian Conference of the Arts Honorary Life Member Award and the Writers Trust of Canada Matt Cohen Award for a Writing Life.