

## TRIBUTE TO RUDY WIEBE

Edmonton Lit Fest Oct 21, 2014

Saturday Night magazine February 1974 [40 years ago!]

“A white man’s burden view of Big Bear” by Myrna Kostash

“Someday western Indians will write novels and their voices will tell us, at last, the authentic version of how their nation contracted culture of the reservation after a millennium of running buffalo and dying of old age. These novels may also tell us that the People are reassembling for a retaliatory war, but that is a chapter no white person can write. We can, however, write of the past we shared with them, the inglorious advance of our technology across the bony bleached prairie, while they were pressed back into the corners we did not want for ourselves.”

I was still living in Toronto and working as a freelance magazine writer when I was assigned by editor Robert Fulford to interview Rudy Wiebe when he was in town on the book tour for *The Temptations of Big Bear*. I hadn’t lived in western Canada since 1965 and, although I would return to live in Edmonton a year after my meeting with Rudy, at that moment in 1974 of reading *Big Bear* I did not know that. What I did know was that I felt I had been run over by a train.

“Whatever scruples one may have about flagellation as a spiritual exercise, it is possible that, politically, the scourges we fashion for ourselves from the guilt of imperialism and racism help drive out the beast we harboured with the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Mounted Police...Somewhere between the atrocities and the expiation lies Rudy Wiebe’s novel, *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Something like a true story, it is social realism raised to the level of the elegy.”

I was gobsmacked – deeply moved, deeply disturbed. The description of the arrival of the railway across the plains, as seen from a Cree point of view - Cree hunters on horseback, watching from a hill the slow but inexorable progress of the iron road - haunted me for a very long time. It had never occurred to me that this “nation-building” event, so celebrated, by Pierre Berton and Gordon Lightfoot, to name contemporary mythologists, represented the eventual

devastation of a whole culture. For the train would bring the settlers. It would bring *us*. And we would plough the so-called *vil'ni zemli* of another people's eternal motherland and call it ours.

“The novel ends with Big Bear in a little room, dying with a dream both of the buffalo and the People – just piles of bones – and of the future urban defacement of the land. Between these two events lies the story of Big Bear's temptations: that he could somehow, as none other of the people had, resist this terrible contraction, the *squeezing* of his space into a spiritless acre of poverty, that he could resist it without violence, murder and hate.”

As it turned out, I was to bear with me for the next several decades the learning and instruction I received from Rudy's book in that first reading in 1974. It was the first of an entire bibliography of texts I was to read that shaped me as a writer in and of my region – Heather Robertson's *Reservations Are for Indians*, Andy Suknaski's *Wood Mountain Poems*, Maria Campbell's *Half Breed*, Connie Kaldor's songs, the *Guess Who's Running Back to Saskatoon*. It took me a while to approach the subject matter of Aboriginal history in Alberta – I made a detour through a rather overwrought telling of intertwined Ukrainian and Mennonite history in passionate response to Rudy's *Blue Mountains of China*, among other Menno versions – but when I did finally get there, with my work on the subject of the Frog Lake Massacre, I became obsessed, especially with the figure of Big Bear's war chief, Wandering Spirit, and turned again to *The Temptations of Big Bear*, where I discovered that Rudy had already rummaged through the archives that I was so cleverly reassembling in my own book, *The Frog Lake Reader*.

“The cunning thing about *Temptations* is that it speaks from several points of view, not only Big Bear's but also from those of Metis traders, a missionary, an army volunteer, a Mounted Police inspector, a farming instructor...they all hang together in a single story, chapters towards a definition of the process of imperialism, so that the attitudes of the whites murdered at Frog Lake are of as much interest and concern as those of the Cree desperadoes. But it is the

People's point of view, their version"...and the rest of the review has gone missing.

Living in Edmonton after 1975, I was to find myself a literary colleague of Rudy's (how thrilling was that for a newbie writer?) Rudy and I showed up on the pages of *NeWest ReView*, edited by George Melnyk, we served on the founding Board of NeWest Press, (another of George Melnyk's made-in-Alberta literary enterprises). On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Writers Guild of Alberta, I reflected on the fact that in the 1970s Alberta literature was springing up all over the landscape. I reminisced: "A typical moment was the launch party (at my apartment) for the collection of short stories, published, incredibly cheaply, by the newly-fledged NeWest Press and featuring work by what we would now call 'emerging' writers: Candace Jane Dorsey, Aritha van Herk, Caterina Edwards, Elvina Boyko, Terese Brasen, Helen Rosta and myself, 'selected' by Rudy Wiebe." (I had written the story in a writing class with Rudy at the university and I was never to write fiction again. What happened in that class??)

I went on: "Rudy and his family subsequently became hosts of inaugural meetings of the NeWest Institute and its forums at their lodge on Strawberry Creek (with Robert Kroetsch, another established not to say patriarchal figure who made frequent appearances in Alberta, famously hiding communal packs of beer in the woods whenever we gathered at the lodge which was Mennonite and "dry").

And when Rudy and Tena moved to Old Strathcona, into a house on 104<sup>th</sup> street, they became neighbours of mine while I lived a block away in the Hromada socialist feminist housing co-op, never quite sure that he approved. But we all mellow, eventually, and I took great pleasure in the occasional shared cup of coffee at the Second Cup up there on Whyte, until I moved "back home," the north side of the river, which as we all know who love and are in awe of the North Saskatchewan, is another world altogether.

Speaking of awe, may I conclude these fond reminiscences with a salute to Rudy's most recent achievements, his 80<sup>th</sup> year and 20<sup>th</sup> book, *Mnohaya lita!*

Oh, and, Rudy, I've uncovered your traces again, in *Scorched Wood People*, when I went looking for Pierre Falcon, the Metis balladeer of the Battle of Seven Oaks in Manitoba in 1816: and there he was, bigger than life. Thank you.