

The Frog Lake Reader

by Myrna Kostash

Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2009, ISBN 1-897126-46-8, 237 pp., \$26.95 paper.

Reviewed by Mary Horodyski

Myrna Kostash has assembled a fascinating and complex montage of excerpts from historical records and interpretations of the Frog Lake events of 1885. In these events, commonly known as the Frog Lake Massacre, nine Frog Lake residents were killed by Plains Cree (all those killed were white men, with the exception of Thomas Quinn, who had Sioux heritage from his mother's side). Subsequently, eight Cree men were tried and hanged later that year, one week after Louis Riel was hanged, and the only mass hanging in Canadian history. The "massacre" has traditionally referred to the Frog Lake men who were killed but it is clear from Kostash's account that the deaths of the First Nations men are of equal tragic importance.

Kostash previously worked the Frog Lake story as a radio documentary and a magazine article. However, she said, "these formats were not enough to contain all that I had found and continued to find" (x). In *The Frog Lake Reader*, Kostash has compiled "all manner of perspective, voice, bias, style" to present the events as "a drama of interplaying, sometimes contradictory, often contrapuntal, narratives" (x).

The Frog Lake events are presented here as a historical mosaic: fragments of perspectives are laid out, ranging from eyewitness accounts and contemporaneous newspaper reports through historians' continuing revisions. Kostash also includes extracts from poetry and novels, giving these interpretations equal weight to the more standard historical sources. Further fragments are from Kostash herself, acting as the narrator, or interstice to the mosaic, bringing together the pieces and defining the picture.

The fragmented format of the *Reader* splits apart the traditional seamless historical narrative into unruly parts. In showing the raw archival materials of the historian's craft, Kostash exposes the bias inherent in the construction of a historical narrative. We can imagine the index cards spread out on the historian's table, and we realize the cards could be arranged in this formation, or that, or another altogether. But it is important to remember that the fragments we see in the *Reader* are the ones Kostash has chosen to display. Likewise, the historical narrative of the book, although complex and contrapuntal, is also the narrative that Kostash has designed.

The weakness of the book is that, as Robert Fulford wrote in a review in *The National Post*, “[i]t’s hard to read.” Kostash includes in the front of her book a “cast of characters” (xiii) who are the actual personages of the Frog Lake events. At the back of the book she provides “biographies of cited writers” (205). Prefacing each excerpt, Kostash gives the name of the source. The reader will, no doubt, as I did, flip back and forth across the book, linking each excerpt to its source. While providing useful information on the bias of the historical informants, the disruption to how we usually read a narrative becomes annoying. And it is clear that the *Reader*, while looking like a compendium, is meant to be read as an unfolding story. Halfway through the book, I changed tactics and tried to read while ignoring the archival distractions. But “tried” is the operative verb, as the shifts in perspective, and the downright contradictions in testimony, make for a bumpy read.

Yet Kostash, I believe, means to give us a jolt. Each time I felt myself on solid ground, a counterpoint swept in. Sometimes the dissonance was on a minor point: for example, Thomas Quinn, the first white man shot, is described as being “slight” (25) and a “petty little man” (26). Later we read from another source that Quinn was “[s]ix and a half feet tall . . . broad-shouldered . . . a splendid figure of a man” (32). Other times the divergence of opinion is on much more important issues: the First Nations people, under the treaty agreements, “ha[d] no grievances and no complaints to make” (185) versus the understanding that under the reserve and ‘work for rations’ systems, coupled with the drought and crop failure of 1884, the First Nations people were “starving” (55).

Historian Sarah Carter says that after the events of 1885 there were “new and determined efforts to keep Aboriginal people and newcomers apart, and to segregate them” (192). In the *Reader*, Kostash tries to bring the First Nations, Métis, and white perspectives together. The voices clash, but as Alexander Morris, a treaty negotiator said, “It [is] impossible to listen to them without interest” (3).

Mary Horodyski is a Winnipeg writer with an M.A. in history. During her graduate studies she took the “narrative turn” and the real historical truth has been illusory ever since.

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