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Don't confuse new biography with history, professor says; The RIEL thing; Who has the right to write about history? Historians? Journalists? Or whoever wants to?: [FINAL Edition]

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Abstract (summary)

The University of Alberta sponsored a major part of this research, namely The Collected Writings of [Louis Riel], which contains every scrap of paper Riel ever wrote -- even his laundry list, as the saying goes. This has made available to scholars a great deal of little-known material, especially Riel's many poems and religious writings. And in addition to work on Riel himself, research has continued on related subjects, such as the fur trade, the two rebellions, Metis land claims, and Metis social history.

Well-known journalist [Maggie Siggins], whose *Revenge of the Land* won the 1992 Governor General's Award for non-fiction, is the first to attempt to synthesize this wealth of new material into a state-of-the-art biography of Riel. Although she has missed a few important items, she has managed to read most of the new research on Riel and turn it into a richly detailed account of his life. She has effectively used his poetry and diaries to let him communicate, in his own words, his innermost thoughts.

For large stretches of Riel's life, Siggins' book sets a new standard for accurate, detailed popular biography. She is, however, oddly ungenerous to the many scholars on whose work her own is completely dependent. Although she acknowledges the importance of the Collected Writings, she never mentions the name of Glen Campbell, who labored patiently for years to establish the text of Riel's poetry, or of Gilles Martel, who pioneered the study of Riel as a religious figure. She does mention [George Stanley], who is one of Canada's truly great historians, but only to dismiss him as "one of the many white historians (who) needed to expound their racist view of the Metis."

Full Text

Riel: A Life of Revolution

by Maggie Siggins

HarperCollins

507 pp., \$29

Since 1963, George Stanley's book *Louis Riel* has been considered the standard biography of the man as well as a classic work of Canadian history. But because Stanley never updated it -- he once told me he didn't believe in doing revised editions -- it has gradually become outdated as 30 more years of research findings have accumulated.

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When it comes to politics -- and this is, after all, the most important part of Riel's life -- Siggins' judgment is overtaken by ideology. Seeing Riel as "a kind of Che Guevara of the Metis people," she turns him into a Byronic revolutionary hero, persecuted to the point of madness, but always on the side of justice. In every encounter, he is in the right and whoever opposes or even differs with him is in the wrong.

Occasionally this leads to bizarre distortions of the evidence, as in her comments on the insanity defence at Riel's trial in 1885. Riel's counsel from Quebec, though young, were two of the most talented lawyers in the country; and in their view, pleading "not guilty by reason of insanity" was the only chance to save their client from the gallows. Riel, in contrast, wanted to use his trial as a political forum to argue that his rebellion was justified -- a hopeless legal strategy because the law recognizes no justification for treason. Not content to leave it there, Siggins says: "It would have been a more difficult defence than insanity, but not unreasonable. 'The logic was sophisticated, political and maybe, dangerous,' political scientist Gerald B. Sperling has written."

But Siggins' notes give no source for this quotation from Sperling, nor is his name to be found in her bibliography. In fact, Sperling, who teaches political science at the University of Regina, is Siggins' husband, and he is not an authority on Riel. Did he pass her a note across the breakfast table so she could have a "source" for a view that no scholar has ever held?

More common than such gross distortion is simple suppression of inconvenient evidence.

For example, despite her detailed description of Riel's last days, she omits to mention his speculations that he would rise from the dead on the third day after his execution, even though these hopes are documented in his own hand and confirmed by the report of Dr. August Jukes, the NWMP doctor at the Regina jail where Riel was imprisoned.

Another technique of distortion is the glancing blow. For example, she endorses the loopy conspiracy theory of D.N. Sprague and Don McLean, according to which Sir John A. Macdonald deliberately provoked the North-West Rebellion so Parliament would approve a loan to the nearly bankrupt Canadian Pacific Railway.

"As far-fetched as this theory may sound," she writes, "it is given credibility by documentation revealing Macdonald's thinking at the time," but after this portentous statement, she provides no further information.

In another instance of the glancing blow, Siggins tells the story of how in 1875 Riel offered to heal the paralysed legs of the American Senator Oliver Morton if that powerful politician would support his plan to invade Canada, then without evidence dismisses the story as "probably at least somewhat apocryphal," even though the source is a letter in Riel's own hand. At times, Siggins also achieves her ideological aims by physical description and characterization worthy of Harlequin romance.

Riel in 1869 is "rugged" and "muscular," while his opponent, the "morose and arrogant" William McDougall, the appointed governor of Rupert's Land, is "a tall, heavily-built man (with) luxuriant hair slicked back off a wide forehead, a great drooping moustache, deep-set rather cold eyes, and thick, heavy lips."

We have the hero and the villain; all that's missing in the melodrama is a heroine with scarlet lips and a heaving, snow-white bosom.

In short, if you like long detailed biographies, read and enjoy this book, but don't confuse it with history.

Tom Flanagan is professor of political science at the University of Calgary and author of several books on Louis Riel and the Metis.

Illustration

Black & White Photo; Color Photo; ILLUSTRATING LOUIS RIEL

Credit: FREELANCE

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