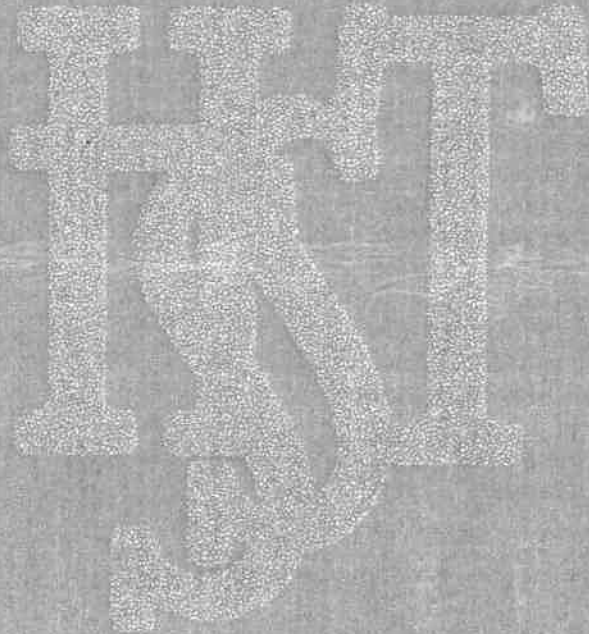


# THE HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE TEACHER



## FEATURE: ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

ALBERTA — *Robert Runté*

ONTARIO — *Donal Déiseach and Donald Power*

MANITOBA — *Joan Irvine and Conrad Sigurdson*

BRITISH COLUMBIA — *Donald C. Wilson*

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# Correspondence

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## The Ethics of Book Reviewing

Thomas Flanagan  
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Reviewing academic books is not a glamorous job. In most cases, the only payment is a free copy of the book itself. Yet the task is a necessary one if the scholarly community is to carry out a critical appraisal of new research. At the very least, anyone who agrees to put his name to a review should read the book himself and write a review which represents his own analysis of it. I was disturbed to see these elementary principles violated in D. Bruce Sealey's review of my book *Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered*, published in this journal, volume 19 (March 1984). Sealey's review is for all practical purposes a condensation of Mark Abley's review of the same book, entitled "A rebel's disputed hanging," in *Maclean's*, November 21, 1983.

In the left column below is Sealey's first paragraph, in the right column are excerpts from Abley's first two paragraphs. It is obvious that Sealey has taken his train of ideas and in some cases his choice of words from Abley, even though the debt is nowhere acknowledged.

### *Sealey*

The Métis leader continues to be a source of intense controversy and this book provides further fuel for the fiery debate. Flanagan knows his subject well for he has edited Riel's diaries and poetry as well as having written a biography that focussed on his unorthodox religious views. This book is limited to an analysis of the rebellion of 1885. The causes of that uprising were many but the question of land rights was of primary importance. The Métis believed that they owned large portions of the North-West Territories and hoped that through Riel their claim would be acknowledged by the Canadian Government and that specific land grants and provincial status would be granted to them. Their failure to achieve this and the subsequent trial and execution of their leader is well known.

### *Abley*

. . . the Métis leader has been a source of intense controversy. . . . Flanagan should know this subject well. Not only has he edited Riel's diaries and poetry, but he has also written a biographical study focusing on Riel's unorthodox religious doctrines. He limits his new book to an analysis of the rebellion of 1885. . . . The rebellion had many causes but the issue of land rights was basic: Riel believed that people of mixed blood were the rightful owners of the North-West Territory. . . . He hoped to obtain provincial status for the region. . . .

It would be too tedious to demonstrate line by line Sealey's total reliance on Abley. Suffice it to say that similar correspondences could be exhibited for every paragraph in Sealey's review. A couple of details are particularly damning. Sealey purports only twice to quote my words from *Riel and the Rebellion*. According to him, I wrote that Riel "got what he deserved, a traitor's death" and that Riel was guilty of "self-seeking venality." Both alleged quotations come from a single sentence in Abley, and both are distorted quotations from my book. I wrote on p.13: "We want to be able to say, in some broad sort of way, whether the Rebellion was indeed justified and Riel was thus a martyr, or whether it was a needless act of violence and Riel got what he deserved, a traitor's death." Again I wrote on p. 102 that "the Rebellion is commonly interpreted as a result of governmental failure and Riel's idealism, rather than of his self-seeking venality." In both places I was posing alternatives, not making sweeping judgments. Sealey follows Abley in tendentiously presenting an alternative as my final view.

One does not expect much of reviews in a popular magazine like *Maclean's*. They are quickly written and quickly forgotten. But reviews in academic journals are supposed to carry some weight. Reviewers are normally chosen for their expertise in the topic. Indeed, Sealey has published widely in the field of Canadian native studies. In particular he is co-author of the widely read book *The Métis: Canada's Forgotten People*. Because of his prior achievements, readers will assume that his opinion counts for something. And perhaps it does, when he is doing his own work. But it is a shabby trick to touch up a piece from *Maclean's* and pass it off as a scholarly review.

Sealey's violation of academic ethics is particularly distressing because he is a role model for many young native scholars. Native studies is a new and rapidly growing discipline in Canada. Since much of the subject matter is inherently controversial, it is essential that all who work within the field do their best to follow the norms of scholarship. What will happen to the younger researchers if the senior people set examples like this?



## **Killing the Messenger**

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Indeed, reviewing books is not a glamorous job, especially when one feels constrained to write a negative review. And the reviewer can commiserate with the author of the book even when pinpointing perceived weaknesses. However, reviewers remain eternally hopeful that the author will not feel personally attacked by the criticisms and in any response will deal with the message rather than attempting to kill the messenger.

I am amused that the first shot at the messenger is "Sealey has taken his train of ideas and in some cases his choice of words from Abley." The exact words from "The causes of . . . and execution of their leader is well known" in the damning paragraph quoted by Flanagan are from *Questions and Answers Concerning the Metis* (2nd edition), a short monograph written by me in 1973.