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Rebellion through the eyes of Riel and Dumont

REVIEWED BY DOUG GRANT

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It is an obvious idea: Have Joseph Boyden, Canada's foremost "Métis" novelist, write the biography of tragic Métis champions Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont. Who better to illuminate their characters, to make them relevant in the Canada of 2010?

Boyden, of Irish, Scottish and Métis roots, must have felt the burden of history – the challenge of distilling years of academic research and debate into a short, readable story. In the end, he chooses sides and gallops tightly behind the two rebels, spinning the tale from their perspective, in simple strokes.

In Boyden's version, the Métis and the Indians are the good guys.

Prime Minister John A. Macdonald is the bad guy with his "racist disdain for these people," whose colleagues are stupid and guilty: the "whining dog" bureaucrat, Lawrence Clarke; "the ignoramous" and "rabid dog," Métis opponent Thomas Scott, who was executed; Indian agent Thomas Quinn, who is "stupid enough" to resist arrest by Cree warriors, so is shot in the head.

Fortunately, at the heart of Boyden's book is also the fascinating relationship between the intellectual Riel, and the man of action Dumont. And it is Dumont who emerges as the more interesting character.

He embodies the Métis people, a prairie man and a born hunter. He may be illiterate and no politician, but he becomes a wily military commander, directing the resistance against the Canadian army sent to suppress the Riel rebellion. Dumont was known as the Métis' chief buffalo hunter, and he used those tactics to harass and intimidate the Canadian soldiers.

Outnumbered at least five to one, facing the terrifying power of the Gatling gun, the under-armed Métis nevertheless fought the Canadian army to a virtual standstill. And they might have done even more, Boyden says, had Riel permitted Dumont full range of action: “Louis refuses to allow Gabriel to go on the offensive, using every excuse he can muster. ... The most nonsensical of all is that guerrilla tactics are too much like Indian tactics, which means they are too savage.” (After the Métis defeat at the Battle of Batoche, Dumont escapes to the United States, where his renown as a prairie fighter earns him a contract with Bill Cody’s Wild West Show, headlining as a marksman with Annie Oakley.)

Yet while the portrayal of Dumont is vivid, Boyden struggles to bring Riel into focus. He wastes much text reproducing lengthy excerpts from Riel’s religious ramblings, which neither elucidate his character nor resonate today.

And for readers waiting impatiently for Boyden’s third novel after the stark beauty of *Three Day Road* and *Through Black Spruce*, there is disappointment lurking here in predictable prose: “Louis’s life is like a river. He has been pulled along from his earliest days in a direction that’s been preordained. The river, this life, has led him finally here to Batoche, and now he senses the river quickening. The waters are beginning to eddy and swirl, indeed are beginning to froth underneath the winter ice. The power of the river, of Louis’s life, pushes hard against the ice that holds it down.”

Riel comes most alive during his trial, as Boyden describes his futile attempts to save himself, frustrated by his limited command of English and by lawyers’ tactics: “He now sees where this is leading: They will argue that he is insane, and therefore not guilty as charged.

“But if they are successful in arguing this, then the rest of Canada and the world may think that the Métis cause is just as insane.” Like many great leaders throughout history, Riel was a mystic who saw himself as the Moses of his people. Yet his well-reasoned, and reasonable, petition to Ottawa in 1884, outlining Métis complaints and demands, shows a shrewd political mind at work.

The enduring historical question is not whether Riel was mentally ill, but whether his cause was just and he justly dealt with. There’s no doubt in Joseph Boyden’s mind about Riel’s answer: “Louis is on trial for being a half-breed, a half-breed who refuses to bow to the people in front of him. He is being judged for his inability to bow down.”

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