

Making major impact on Canada

These two books tell inside story of four historic men

By Bill Robertson, For The StarPhoenix
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LOUIS RIEL & GABRIEL DUMOUNT

By Joseph Boyden, Penguin, \$26

LOUIS-HIPPOLYTE LaFONTAINE & ROBERT BALDWIN

By John Ralston Saul, Penguin, \$26

The latest two volumes in the Extraordinary Canadians series from Penguin Books are also the only ones about two people each. The general editor of the series, John Ralston Saul, takes on the men he considers to be the architects of Canada as we know it in LouisHippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin. He has enlisted Canadian novelist Joseph Boyden -author of Three Day Road and a man with Metis roots -to author the book on Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont, men whose names still resonate across Canada, particularly here in the west.

Relative to Saul's biography, and to a number of other volumes in the series, Boyden's book is short, swift, and strong on narrative. Every now and then he pauses to ponder a troubling question from this period of Canadian history, but mostly he drives ahead with his story of Metis hunter and chief Dumont bringing Metis leader Riel out of exile in Montana to help plead for the rights of their people in the face of a nervous and largely prejudiced national eastern government.

SASKATCHEWAN ANGLE

Boyden is a novelist, after all, not a historian, and he can tell a good story. He also humbly accedes to historians who have gone before him and willingly leans on their work. Where Saul cites seven pages of sources for his biography, Boyden cites few more than seven works, notably books by George Woodcock, Maggie Siggins and Thomas Flanagan.

The story Boyden tells is one couched in racism and ethnic prejudice. John A. MacDonald, despite advice to the contrary, ignores Metis title to land in Manitoba in 1869 so he can push ahead with his railroad.

Boyden readily admits MacDonald was nervous about the threat of American expansion from the south and needed to lay claim to all of Canada with a national railroad. Rather than solving anything, he ignored the Metis question. The Metis pushed on to Saskatchewan and reestablished themselves, this time in the Batoche area, but the Canadian government kept moving west.

With the situation in the mid-1880s set to become a replay of 15 years ago, and the MacDonald government continuing to ignore the land and citizenship claims of the Metis, Dumont went and got Riel.

The story that follows is familiar. Once it was obvious MacDonald had no interest in negotiating with the Metis and was willing to use force to get them out of the way, Boyden is bold in his assertion the resistance -as it is now called -would have been far better served if Dumont, a hunter, had been allowed to lead rather than the increasingly unstable Riel.

MISS ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

Boyden makes a strenuous point there were a number of times and places in which the lightly armed and badly outnumbered Metis could have used home ground to their advantage and won the day, routing the Canadian force and pushing MacDonald into negotiations. But in each instance Riel insisted Dumont hold back. Rather than fight, Riel chose to pray, becoming more and more convinced he was a messiah.

Without the advantage of speed and surprise, the Metis were beaten, the final battle ending with a 93-year-old man bayoneted and a 10-year-old girl shot.

Despite worldwide outrage, Riel was condemned to hang, though, as MacDonald famously asserted, "every dog in Quebec should howl." Riel believed almost to the end his trial would give him a chance finally to air the Metis point of view and MacDonald would listen. Dumont escaped to the U.S. and joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, eventually being given title to his land at Batoche in 1902.

Saul's story of LaFontaine and Baldwin begins in violence as well, but it is very much more a story of conciliation and negotiation led by two very different men. Saul begins with the riots in Montreal of 1849 as people viciously opposed to the new democratic reform government first protested, then burned down the parliament, and with it our young country's books, archives, and national portraits.

MASTER DESIGNERS

Watching this chaos, but resolutely not ordering the militia to fire on the mob, were LaFontaine and Baldwin, leaders of Lower and Upper Canada. After much hard work, they had put together a government unlike any seen in the world before.

It is Saul's contention these two men, both of whom could have slipped into a comfortable colonial existence, rose to design a new nation, a democracy with a "broad program of social, political, economic and administrative policies consciously and intellectually designed to bring

together opposing religions, languages and races." He goes on to say what was "radical was the idea that a fair democracy could be based not on a definition of races as an expression of the nation state, but on what today we would call diversity." Also, the Canadian movement was "based on the rigorous use of political restraint," unlike the revolutionary and reform movements of the U.S. and Europe.

What this meant to LaFontaine and Baldwin was they continually had to fight off both political critics and murderous thugs who had more to gain by aligning themselves with the old colonial order, or with a specific race or religion. These two men, argues Saul, moreso than John A. MacDonald and his cohort in the 1860s, were the true architects of Canada.

They won elections after many defeats, they put together a government from 1848 to 1851 that pushed through election bills, taxes for education, and a university and jury system, all of which are still in place today. Their government of inclusion and restraint under intense physical threat became a model for leaders such as Gandhi and Mandela.

In Saul's biography of two men largely unknown to the average Canadian, we meet the forefathers of our government and witness again and again the value of moderation. In Boyden's work, we see a coming together of two different sensibilities, one European and religious, the other traditional and First Nation, and what happened after moderation and negotiation failed. Boyden stresses his lesson is "progress" and should not be allowed to trample people. These books are required reading for Canadians.

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