

Visions of equality and inclusion

Riel, Dumont, Baldwin and LaFontaine had much in common

By JOHN KALBFLEISCH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE
October 22, 2010



Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin fought against the oligarchies of their day. Photograph by: Scott McKowen, Penguin

Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine on the one hand and Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont on the other could scarcely be more different. The first pair were sophisticated and successful lawyer-politicians; the second, anything but. The first pair were at home in the populated, industrializing East; the second were from a West poised between a kind of pre-lapsarian innocence and an ominously regimented future.

Yet as suggested by authors John Ralston Saul and Joseph Boyden, they shared a similar vision of Canada, or rather of a Canada that could be, a nation rejoicing in complexity, restraint, equality and inclusiveness.

This vision led Baldwin and LaFontaine, in the 1840s, to a daring alliance in the united colony of Canada West (today's Ontario) and Canada East (Quebec). For Reformers like them, the general public good was paramount, regardless of language, religion or national origin. This meant responsible government working for the benefit of all, not the cosy oligarchies of the day retaining power and its privileges for themselves.

For Riel and Dumont 40 years later, such a vision of Canada meant acknowledging the rights - to property, to political representation, to a way of life - of Métis and Indians. They were rights that hitherto had been grossly abused or ignored. Yet Riel and Dumont would also include room for other peoples, including the settlers starting to flood in from the East.

Violence was a part of their lives, yet all four sought to avoid it. The opening scene of Saul's book dramatically shows LaFontaine, prime minister of the colony, with his deputy Baldwin at

his side, staring down a rabid Tory mob in Montreal. They refused to countenance a military crackdown - and the deaths that would surely follow - even when the mob burned down the parliament building in Youville Square and stoned Governor General Lord Elgin.

Riel never fired a gun during the Northwest Rebellion he led. He worked constantly to rein in the hotheads behind him, and placed his faith, however naively, in the good will of Sir John A. Macdonald and in the imminent intervention of God. Even Dumont, the rebels' military leader, time and again accepted Riel's restraint. As Boyden points out, it was repeated provocation by Canadian soldiers and others, bent on crushing the Métis, that finally pushed Dumont past endurance.

The threads of inclusiveness and restraint constantly present in the lives of these four men are woven into Canada today. They are part of what Saul calls an "ethical cord." Their ideas, triumphs, even failures "somehow constitute a mirror of our society."

Macdonald and the other Fathers of Confederation are rightly honoured. But Saul implicitly makes the case that even more honour is due to Baldwin and LaFontaine as the fathers of modern Canada itself.

That said, Saul's book in particular suffers from a certain one-sidedness. His Baldwin and LaFontaine can do no wrong; their political opponents, their various governors general (Elgin excepted) and the Colonial Office can do no right.

Perhaps this can be charged to the book's brevity, though Boyden in even fewer pages manages to paint a more warty picture of Riel and Dumont. In no way does he shrink from Riel's vacillation and his outright nuttiness.

A recurring, malign presence in both books is the Orange Order. Orangemen repeatedly broke up the election rallies of LaFontaine, Baldwin and the other Reformers, and sometimes were even paid by the governor general himself to do so. It was the ravings of Thomas Scott, an especially bigoted Orangeman, that prompted Riel to send him before a kangaroo court in Red River that condemned him to death in 1870.

It was a mistake, Boyden notes, that would "haunt Riel for the rest of his years." And so it was, in 1885, that relentless pressure from Orangemen in Ontario helped persuade Macdonald that Riel's own death sentence should not be commuted.

Yet who were these people, the polar opposites of LaFontaine and company? What was the source of the Orangemen's hatred? Why did they become so powerful? On this, the two books are largely silent.

The books are part of a new series called Extraordinary Canadians, under Saul's general editorship. Their subjects, which include Wilfrid Laurier, Tommy Douglas, Lucy Maud Montgomery and Maurice Richard, cover a broad range.

Perhaps, should the series be extended, there will be room for a biography of Ogle Robert Gowan, first grand master of the Orange Order in Canada. He might not be everyone's idea of an admirable Canadian, but he certainly was an extraordinary one, "a mirror," in Saul's words, "an instrument for measuring ourselves."

John Ralston Saul and Joseph Boyden discuss and sign these new biographies on Monday, Oct. 25, at 6 p.m. at the Maxwell Cummings Auditorium at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1379 Sherbrooke St. W. Cost: \$5, or \$3 for students or seniors. Call 514-845-5811.

John Kalbfleisch's Second Draft column on Montreal's history appears each Saturday in The Gazette.

Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin

By John Ralston Saul

Penguin Canada, 253 pages, \$26

Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont

By Joseph Boyden

Penguin Canada, 204 pages, \$26

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