

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Blair STONECHILD & Bill WAISER, *Loyal till Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion* (Saskatoon: Fifth House Pubs., 1997)

In the interests of Canadian Imperial expansion in the 19th century, a historical meta-narrative was created to justify the subduing of the Canadian west and its original inhabitants. As a necessary consequence, the voices and stories of Aboriginal peoples were suppressed or distorted, and therefore so were alternative interpretations of events. In recent years, scholars have become increasingly aware – usually because of vocal Aboriginal critics – that the historical orthodoxy is no longer adequate, and are now attempting to tap into Aboriginal oral traditions to revise or replace previous interpretations. *Loyal till Death* by Blair Stonechild and Bill Waiser purports to challenge the interpretive orthodoxy by examining the North-West Rebellion from a First Nations perspective in order to demonstrate that Indian involvement in 1885 was isolated and sporadic, rather than part of a grand alliance with the Metis. Traditional Canadian history describes the events of 1885 as a joint Indian and Metis uprising, and that therefore Indians were rebels against the state. This description was used to justify the execution of eight Cree men and the imprisonment of Cree leadership, as well as repressive legislation that monitored their movements, controlled their economic endeavors, and restricted their political agendas. Stonechild and Waiser make the claim that this book is not only the First Nations perspective on 1885, but that they utilize First Nations oral accounts in order to substantiate this perspective. While there was an effort to acquire the oral accounts from First Nations communities through an extensive oral history project, this book fails to utilize them in either a comprehensive or substantive manner or to create a truly alternative historical interpretation.

This project was sponsored by Canadian Parks Services to incorporate more of the First Nations perspective into the Rebellion's interpretive sites. Ten reserves in central Saskatchewan were directly involved in the data collection through an interview process conducted between 1992 and 1994 and these were buttressed by interviews conducted on behalf of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College from 1984 to 1985. Through their approach, Stonechild and Waiser assert a commitment to the oral traditions of First Nations peoples, however, by their own disclosure, they found the oral history accounts lacking in specific detail, and therefore "of limited use." (p. 264) As a result, the majority of this book's new interpretation comes entirely from published accounts of the Rebellion, rather than the oral tradition of the communities. Seemingly, only the assertion that First Nations remained loyal to the Queen because of the seriousness with which they viewed their treaty obligations is derived from oral tradition. But it is not until Chapter Four, fully one third through the book, that the oral material is even utilized.

In order to substantiate their premise that First Nations were loyal during the Rebellion, the authors establish the foundations of that loyalty in the relationship created by the signing of Treaty Six in 1876. While there is a rich oral tradition surrounding the negotiations and signing of the treaty which could have served to introduce a First Nations perspective to their book, the authors chose to describe the event entirely through written sources. Stonechild and Waiser could have drawn upon the extensive compilation of oral tradition about Treaty Six's signing already done by Saskatchewan's Office of the Treaty Commissioner to infuse their rather flat and lifeless rendition of the treaty signing. Instead, they relied on previous interpretations, adding nothing substantially new to our understanding of this momentous occasion. By utilizing the rich oral tradition about the signing of the treaties, the authors could have strengthened their claim that they were providing a new interpretation of events from sources never before utilized.

Despite their attempt to liberate First Nations people from the Canadian meta-narrative, they ironically perpetuate certain parts of it through their own loyalty thesis. As they collected First Nations oral testimony, they ignored the equally rich Metis oral tradition, which would have fleshed out the Aboriginal perspective. In its absence, the Metis continue to be regarded as manipulative thugs and bullies who forced unwitting Indians to break their oaths of loyalty. The strong leadership that negotiated and signed one of the most important treaties in Western Canada were bullied into

participating in a rebellion that was not theirs and they alone paid the price for Metis actions. The authors do not set the record straight with the oral tradition, and do all Aboriginal people a disservice by reinforcing those aspects of the meta-narrative that describe Aboriginal people as gullible, simple-minded and child-like.

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