

New publications document Canada's past

book reviews by Wayne Kondro

Crowfoot Chief of the Blackfeet (Hurtig, paperback 1976, \$5.95)

Hugh Dempsey's biography of Crowfoot offers an interesting possibility of insight into the character of the chief of the Blackfoot tribe. A historical account of events and policies in the life of Crowfoot, the book is written in a literary style so lucid and imaginative, one tempted to call it fiction.

Dempsey elucidates in his preface that his intention is to dispel the theory that Crowfoot was either a "government lackey" or a "good Indian." Whether or not he succeeds depends on your preference for the approaches available to Indian chiefs of the time. Of course, in light of the plight of the Indians today, it is difficult to decide whether Riel, Big Bear, and Red Jacket were right to rebel, or whether Crowfoot's pacifism was the proper approach.

Dempsey's Crowfoot is not singularly a pacifist. He is characterized by loyalty, both to the queen and to the tribe, by a neutrality to war and religion, and by overall efficiency to mankind. Even so, he is not always true to the ideals of justice, freedom and happiness. These qualities are usually associated with indiscretions by fellow Indians, indiscretions which are often overlooked when committed by white society.

It is difficult to believe that a man who apparently had such foresight regarding the inevitable death of the Indian way of life, would so trust the intruders as to ignore their differences, and so calmly accept treaty proposals and clauses. Such a procedure would imply complete knowledge of the implications of the treaties and one hundred per cent support from his tribesmen. Crowfoot seems likely. Granted, Crowfoot may have expected the upcoming thralldom, but it is doubtful whether he foresaw the immediate or long-term conditions to which the Indian would be subject.

Because the book is founded upon the stories and anecdotes of Blackfoot people who survived the epidemics and starvation sequences of the eighties, it offers us an added advantage. More specifically, the details of the life-style of the Blackfoot nation are brought forward and first-hand insight into the daily life and traditions of the Blackfoot tribe is provided. It is this insight, coupled with the qualitative style in which the book is written that makes it pleasurable and recommended reading. While Hugh Dempsey's

Crowfoot may not be entirely accurate, in terms of motives, the possibilities for accuracy are there. To each their own decision.

Sitting Bull, The Years in Canada by Grant MacEwen (Hurtig, paperback, 1976)

For the sake of the historical pundits, I will have to call this light history. The paperback edition of *Sitting Bull* would not pass as a thesis, but it is fairly entertaining and informative history.

The flaws are largely due to the subject. The era of Louis Riel was one of the most active in Canadian history and by far the most widely discussed. Added to this are the myths and interpretations handed down from Canadian literature, it being considered improper not to have written a book involving the characters of that time. This plethora defies truth.

The book itself is perhaps not properly titled. More apt would be the title *Major James Morrow Walsh*. Walsh was an early officer of the Northwest Mounted Police, and unfortunately for us, commands the utmost respect from MacEwen. MacEwen's admiration for Walsh suffers from the same absence that characterizes the remainder of the book. That is, an absence of all but good motives. This benignity ensures that there is no one, in all of Canada West, (with the exception of the odd illicit whiskey trader and the occasional renegade Indian) who is not motivated by benevolence, kindness and purity of heart. The prime example of this, of course, is the beneficent Major Walsh, whose intelligence and compassion for mankind inspired such respect that even Sitting Bull, the terror of the West, would not make a move without Walsh's advice.

This hardly seems plausible. Granted, Sitting Bull and Walsh were friends but the former was hardly idiotic enough to trust the very word of Saint Walsh. Even at that time the specific Canadian propensity for graft, greed and often inhumane treatment towards minority racial groups was in effect. The Canadian and American governments adopted a policy which read, 'if you don't want to fight 'em, starve 'em.' This policy was promptly implemented in the instance of Sitting Bull's flight to Canada for amnesty, and successfully executed. Even Major Walsh was not so great a

humanitarian as to transcend the anomaly of classifying Sitting Bull as an American Indian.

Nevertheless, the book deserves to be read. MacEwen's style and engaging sort of humour make it, at times, a pleasure to do so. As I suspect there is more to the motivations behind the events, I would warn those who are relatively unfamiliar with Canadian history, not to believe everything you read. As for the pundits, I'm sure you won't anyways.

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