

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



The Seven Oaks Incident and the Construction of a Historical Tradition, 1816 to 1970

Lyle Dick

Volume 2, numéro 1, 1991

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031029ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/031029ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)
1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Dick, L. (1991). The Seven Oaks Incident and the Construction of a Historical Tradition, 1816 to 1970. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 2(1), 91–113. <https://doi.org/10.7202/031029ar>

Résumé de l'article

Le discours historique canadien a longtemps considéré l'incident de Seven Oaks, cette violente confrontation entre Métis et colons de la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson établis par Selkirk à la Rivière Rouge, comme un « massacre ». Un examen minutieux des textes qui constituent la genèse de cette interprétation permet de départager l'« histoire », c'est-à-dire les faits de base, du « discours », c'est-à-dire des éléments qui proviennent de la rhétorique propre aux historiens de cet événement. Par ailleurs, le discours sur Seven Oaks offre un corpus de choix pour réévaluer les rôles respectifs qu'ont joués amateurs et professionnels de l'histoire dans l'historiographie de l'Ouest. L'incident de Seven Oaks ne fut pas considéré comme un massacre avant les années 1870, si l'on se fie aux rapports de l'époque établis par le Commissaire William Coltman et aux travaux des historiens amateurs vivant alors à la Rivière Rouge. Cette interprétation provient plutôt de la période suivant 1870, alors que les immigrants anglo-canadiens commencèrent à former le groupe dominant. Les historiens anglo-canadiens ne retinrent que des comptes rendus de la bataille biaisés en faveur des leurs et utilisèrent des techniques romantiques d'exposition de l'intrigue, en vue de présenter les actions des Métis comme celles d'un massacre sauvage. Au cours de ces narrations, la fonction du rôle supposé des Métis à Seven Oaks est de justifier, sur le plan allégorique, la confiscation des terres de ces autochtones de l'Ouest par les nouveaux arrivants. En structurant ainsi leurs écrits pour promouvoir la position idéologique de leur ethnie, les historiens de l'après-Confédération ont forgé une tradition qui allait par la suite dominer l'historiographie de l'incident de Seven Oaks durant cent années. Depuis 1970, cette tradition a pâli quelque peu dans les cercles universitaires, mais les ouvrages des historiens amateurs continuent d'en reprendre l'essentiel. The critical comments and editorial advice of Ron Frohwerk, John Thompson, Philip Goldring, and Jennifer Brown are acknowledged with gratitude.

The Seven Oaks Incident and the Construction of a Historical Tradition, 1816 to 1970

LYLE DICK

Résumé

The Seven Oaks incident, a violent clash between Métis and Hudson's Bay Company/Selkirk settlers at Red River in 1816, was long represented in Canadian historical discourse as a "massacre." In investigating the genesis of this interpretation, the paper examines the primary record and employs textual analysis to distinguish the "story," or basic facts, from the "discourse," or rhetorical overwriting by the event's historians. The paper also reexamines the respective roles of amateur and professional historians in Western Canadian historiography in the context of the discourse on Seven Oaks.

The contemporary report of Commissioner William Coltman and works of Red River amateurs are used to establish that Seven Oaks was generally not considered a "massacre" in the pre-Confederation era. Rather, this interpretation largely dates from the post-1870 period, when Anglo-Canadian immigrants to Western Canada became the region's ruling group. Anglo-Canadian historians utilised partisan accounts of the battle and romantic plot structures to reinterpret the Métis actions as a savage slaughter. In these narratives, the alleged Métis role at Seven Oaks functioned allegorically to justify the dispossession of this western Native group's lands by the newcomers. In structuring their texts to promote the ideological position of their own ethnic group, post-Confederation academics established a tradition of writing that dominated Seven Oaks historiography for one hundred years. Since 1970, this tradition has weakened somewhat in academic circles, while popular historians have continued to reproduce its essentials in their accounts.

* * * *

Le discours historique canadien a longtemps considéré l'incident de Seven Oaks, cette violente confrontation entre Métis et colons de la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson établis par Selkirk à la Rivière Rouge, comme un "massacre". Un examen minutieux des textes qui constituent la genèse de cette interprétation permet de départager l' "histoire", c'est-à-dire les faits de base, du "discours", c'est-à-dire des éléments qui proviennent de la rhétorique propre aux historiens de cet événement. Par ailleurs, le discours sur Seven Oaks offre un corpus de choix pour réévaluer les rôles respectifs qu'ont joués amateurs et professionnels de l'histoire dans l'historiographie de l'Ouest canadien.

The critical comments and editorial advice of Ron Frohwerk, John Thompson, Philip Goldring, and Jennifer Brown are acknowledged with gratitude.

L'incident de Seven Oaks ne fut pas considéré comme un massacre avant les années 1870, si l'on se fie aux rapports de l'époque établis par le Commissaire William Coltman et aux travaux des historiens amateurs vivant alors à la Rivière Rouge. Cette interprétation provient plutôt de la période suivant 1870, alors que les immigrants anglo-canadiens commencèrent à former le groupe dominant. Les historiens anglo-canadiens ne retinrent que des comptes rendus de la bataille biaisés en faveur des leurs et utilisèrent des techniques romantiques d'exposition de l'intrigue, en vue de présenter les actions des Métis comme celles d'un massacre sauvage. Au cours de ces narrations, la fonction du rôle supposé des Métis à Seven Oaks est de justifier, sur le plan allégorique, la confiscation des terres de ces autochtones de l'Ouest par les nouveaux arrivants. En structurant ainsi leurs écrits pour promouvoir la position idéologique de leur ethnie, les historiens de l'après-Confédération ont forgé une tradition qui allait par la suite dominer l'historiographie de l'incident de Seven Oaks durant cent années. Depuis 1970, cette tradition a pâli quelque peu dans les cercles universitaires, mais les ouvrages des historiens amateurs continuent d'en reprendre l'essentiel.

Voulez-vous écouter chanter

Une chanson de vérité?¹

Pierre Falcon, "Chanson de la Grenouillère," (1816)

Each [the historian and the poet] is a maker of myths, only the historian has neglected his job of making myths in this decadent, analytical age.²

W. L. Morton (1943)

It is to be regretted that in a war of this kind, a very painful duty devolves on the narrator . . . for lawyers and commissioners will not be satisfied with "I was informed of this," or "I was told of that," but, "Who were the persons that informed you," is the point in question.³

Colin Robertson to Peter Irving, December 1818

In 1891, the Manitoba Historical Society dedicated the province's first historical monument, a stone cairn to commemorate the Seven Oaks incident, a violent clash in 1816 between a group of Hudson's Bay Company officers and Selkirk settlers and a party of Métis traders from Red River and the upper Assiniboine. The monument's brief inscription contrasted with a growing body of writings on this controversial event, a collection made larger by the society's simultaneous release of a pamphlet to mark the occasion.⁴ The pamphlet included excerpts from previously published accounts of the battle or its contexts by two prominent Manitoba historians of the period — George Bryce, an academic, and Charles N. Bell, an amateur. The combination of these excerpts had a retrospective historiographical significance: it was the last time that two competing interpretations of Seven Oaks appeared under one cover, the last time that one version was not rewritten, overwritten, or erased by its rival.

1. Canada. National Archives (NA), Selkirk Papers, MG 2, A 1, fols. 9207-08.

2. W. L. Morton, comment on R. G. Trotter, "Aims in the Study and Teaching of History in Canadian Universities Today," Canadian Historical Association, *Annual Report* (1943): 61.

3. E. E. Rich, ed., *Colin Robertson's Correspondence Book, September 1817 to September 1818* (London, 1939), 28.

4. "Seven Oaks," Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, *Transactions* 43 (1891-92).

The pamphlet's publication simultaneously marked the eclipse of one tradition of English-language writing on Seven Oaks and the inauguration of another. The outgoing tradition, represented by Bell's text, comprised a series of writings on the event by amateurs with ties to Old Red River or witnesses with direct knowledge of the event. The ascendant tradition, represented by Bryce's version and his academic successors in the West, drew instead from treatments earlier advanced by Lord Selkirk, the Hudson's Bay Company, and their sympathizers, and now promoted to orthodoxy by the newly dominant Anglo-Canadian immigrant group in the West. Yet Bryce's and Bell's texts contrasted in more ways than the interpretative conclusions they drew from the event. They differed sharply in techniques of collection, evaluation, and presentation of empirical evidence; in the handling of contradictory or contentious material; even in the definition of what constituted appropriate historical evidence. Their differences in methodology, interpretation, and form bear upon larger issues than the reconstruction of the Seven Oaks incident and go to the root of history-making in Western Canada. They chart a trajectory from the raw pluralistic origins of prairie historiography in the early-nineteenth-century controversies over Seven Oaks to the polished hierarchies of twentieth-century historical writing. An intensive investigation of treatments of this single event reveals much about the historiographical process in Western Canada, and about the role of history in the construction of cultural traditions.

Such a reconsideration also occasions a reexamination of the respective roles of amateurs and professionals in Canadian prairie historiography. In *The Writing of Canadian History*, Carl Berger argues that serious written history only began with the creation of an academic discipline. Nineteenth-century "clergymen, lawyers, and journalists" wrote history "to amuse themselves, to commemorate the eminent, to strengthen patriotism, or to draw morals from the past"; twentieth-century professionals practised the "critical study of the Canadian past." For Berger, these developments represent "a decisive change in the nature of historical study."⁵ Similar arguments have been advanced by other Canadian intellectual historians. M. Brook Taylor argues that nineteenth-century historical writing was characterised by amateur partisanship,⁶ while A. B. McKillop credits the late-nineteenth-century academics George Wrong at the University of Toronto and George Bryce at the University of Manitoba with initiating a "serious attempt to examine original sources" and "introducing principles of historical criticism into Canadian historiography."⁷

None of these writers devotes much attention to the actual *writing* of history: methods of research, forms of argument, or structures of historical representation. Instead, these works are thematic discussions of the subjects Canadian historians choose, combined with group biographies of its practitioners. There is no substantive discussion of how these new twentieth-century professionals improved the techniques of the nineteenth-century amateurs.

5. Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto, 1976). The following quotations are from page 1 of this text.

6. M. Brook Taylor, *Promoters, Patriots and Partisans: Historiography in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto, 1989).

7. A. B. McKillop, "Historiography in English," *Canadian Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., 1993.

A historiographical reconsideration of the Seven Oaks incident presents a rare opportunity to test Berger's thesis. With the exception of Bryce's early writings, all of the texts on the battle written before the 1890s were prepared by amateurs, while the English-language texts of historiographical significance thereafter were by professionals. Moreover, the survival of oral tradition on Seven Oaks, specifically Pierre Falcon's "Chanson de la Grenouillère," affords the opportunity for alternative perspectives on the event from outside the realm of the written word. The presence of oral tradition and amateur texts outside the mainstream historiography facilitates an interrogation of long-standing notions about the boundaries of legitimate historical discourse in Canada.

Rather than provide a historiographical survey, culminating in an improved, factual reconstruction, this paper proposes to deconstruct the various versions of Seven Oaks by drawing on basic methods from literary and linguistic criticism, and focusing on the relationships between "story" and "discourse,"⁸ two narrative functions integral to any historical reconstruction. Contemporary theorists have argued that all forms of historical narrative constitute a content independent of the "facts" they subsume.⁹ An analysis of writing on Seven Oaks suggests that literary strategies not only influenced the writers' selection and ordering of particular historical data, but actually required both the production of supporting "facts" and the negation or omission of alternative "facts." Moreover, the inherently allegorical character of historical discourse inevitably generates meanings on both literal and metaphorical levels.¹⁰ This paper will also consider the extent to which the discourse on Seven Oaks could be explained by the concept of "master narrative," an overarching cultural allegory which explains an entire tradition of writing on the event.

That said, history itself is not a text, though it can be apprehended only through the spoken or written word. There is an obvious need to investigate the existing literature and the primary sources to establish the reported facts or basic "story" from which the discourse on Seven Oaks has been constructed.

Most writing on Seven Oaks occurred in the period of controversy immediately following the event, and later in the hundred years between 1870 and 1970. The enormous volume of literature of the early period largely falls under the rubric of partisan pamphleteering by the contending parties or their representatives.¹¹ The primary source materials also include the transcripts of subsequent trials of participants in the battle,¹²

8. "Story" is defined as a sequence of events to which historians refer in constructing their narratives, while "discourse," or plot, is a particular version of the referred-to events. See Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca and London, 1986), 108-29.

9. The narratological study of historical texts comprises a growing subdiscipline within the field of historical criticism. Among various works now published in this area, see Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore, 1973); Dominick LaCapra, *Historical Criticism* (Ithaca, 1985); Sande Cohen, *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline* (Berkeley, 1986); and Hans Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation* (Madison, 1989).

10. See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, 1987), 26-57.

11. The published sources are listed in W. S. Wallace, "The Literature Relating to the Selkirk Controversy," *Canadian Historical Review* 13:1 (March 1932): 45-50.

12. A. Amos, ed., *Report of the Trials in the Courts of Canada Relative to the Destruction of the Earl of Selkirk's Settlement of the Red River with Observations* (London, 1820), and

the surviving sworn depositions of various witnesses to Seven Oaks and related events,¹³ and a voluminous correspondence between government officials and representatives of either Lord Selkirk or the principals of the North West Company.¹⁴ Finally, the period record includes the report of William Bachelor Coltman, the principal commissioner appointed to investigate the Seven Oaks incident and other violent episodes associated with the fur companies' rivalry.¹⁵ Coltman's report in particular warrants close attention. The most detailed and comprehensive analysis ever prepared on the Seven Oaks incident, it has been largely ignored in the dominant Anglo-Canadian historiography. Its neglect in its own period might be attributed to several factors, beginning with the multipurpose mandate accorded Coltman and his fellow commissioner, John Fletcher, and its frosty reception by the Selkirk side. In his instructions to the commissioners, Governor Sherbrooke charged them with a number of roles, to serve, alternately, as investigators, enforcers, and peacemakers.¹⁶ It was Coltman's prosecution of these latter powers as a justice of the peace which occasioned an almost immediate and continuing series of attacks on his impartiality by the Selkirk party.

Coltman's peacemaking and law enforcement roles apparently also disqualified his report from the serious attention of Anglo-Canadian historians after 1870. Not until 1910, when George Bryce praised the report as "admirable" and "fairly impartial," was it mentioned in the literature.¹⁷ In summarising its contents in 1939, A. S. Morton stated that "the detailed report describes the acts of violence with great particularity,

Report of the Proceedings Connected with the Disputes Between the Earl of Selkirk and the North-West [sic] Company at the Assizes Held at York, in Upper Canada, October, 1818, From Minutes Taken in Court (London, 1819).

13. See NA, Records of the Provincial and Civil Secretaries' Offices, Québec, Lower Canada, and Canada East, 1760-1867, RG 4, B 46, "Lower Canada, Commission of Enquiry into the Red River Disturbances, 1815-21," Vols. 1-5 (hereafter "Commission of Enquiry"); Manitoba. Provincial Archives, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, E. 8/5, "Papers Relating to Disturbances Forwarded to Lord Bathurst, 1815-1819," and E. 8/6, "Papers Relating to Disturbances, 1814-1819"; McGill University Libraries, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Selkirk Papers, MS 403/12 and 403/13.
14. In addition to the assorted correspondence reproduced in *Papers Relating to the Red River Settlement*, see the original letters in NA, RG 4, B 46, "Commission of Enquiry," and NA, Colonial Office Records, MG 11, CO 42, Vol. 181.
15. "A General Statement and Report Relative to the Disturbances in the Indian Territories of British North America by the Undersigned Special Commissioner for Inquiring into the Offences Committed in the Said Indian Territories and the Circumstances Attending the Same." Two manuscript copies of the report were examined, in NA, Colonial Office Records, MG 11, CO 42, Vol. 181, fols. 74-232 and in NA, Fur Trade and Indian Records 1763-1867, MG 19, E 2, "Red River Settlement," Vol. 1. Both copies contain essentially the same text as the published version in Great Britain. Parliament, House of Commons, *Papers Relating to the Red River Settlement*, Paper 18, No. 584 (London, 1819), 165-250. This version has been republished in *Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota* 4 (1915): 451-653.
16. Instructions to W. B. Coltman and John Fletcher by Sir J. C. Sherbrooke, 11 November 1816, reprinted in *Papers Relating to the Red River Settlement*, 64.
17. George Bryce, *The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company* (3rd ed., Toronto, 1910), 255.

on the whole accurately and with a great show of impartiality."¹⁸ Even John Morgan Gray, who was critical of Coltman's role as commissioner, endorsed aspects of his report.¹⁹ When it came to Seven Oaks, however, these historians utilised neither the report's data nor its conclusions. Bypassing as well the original testimony on which it was based, they chose instead to rely on mediations of these sources, that is, on representations of representations.

Coltman's research methodology derived from his legal experience as a justice of the peace,²⁰ and more generally from the inductive approach of Baconian science. To establish the facts of Seven Oaks and related incidents, he or his colleague, John Fletcher, examined under oath a large selection of witnesses. Each voluntary deposition²¹ was transcribed, sworn, and signed. Of the thirty-three depositions or statements concerning Seven Oaks which were identified by name, sixteen were taken from Selkirk settlers or HBC employees, and seventeen from Métis or NWC witnesses. Coltman therefore appears even-handed in the compilation of evidence and in bringing all of it forward in his analysis.²²

Beyond the adducing of evidence, Coltman's techniques of examination were derivative of contemporary British courtroom practice. He endeavoured to determine the credibility of the individual witnesses by examining their depositions for internal consistency, or by comparing their statements on specific points made on different occasions. In keeping with contemporary civil procedure, he also made an effort to establish the relative weight of evidence. He operated according to the convention, current in eighteenth-century civil jurisprudence, that stress must be placed on the character of the witness.²³ Regarding evidence submitted by the fur companies, he was more skeptical. His approach was to consider these writings as "moral evidence," useful in establishing admissions by these parties, but not to be taken as proof.²⁴ Various legal issues pertaining to the broader conflict of which Seven Oaks formed a part were also discussed at length in both this report and in a shorter, confidential memorandum he sent to Sherbrooke a week before formally submitting the *Statement*.²⁵

Coltman's reconstitution of Seven Oaks comprises a massive discussion in its own right. Here it is useful to focus only on those contentious points which have been most prominent in the event's subsequent historiography. These include the issues of which party fired the first shot, the extent to which the battle was a premeditated "massacre,"

18. A. S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (Toronto, 1939), 599.

19. John Morgan Gray, *Lord Selkirk of Red River* (Toronto, 1963), 320-21.

20. Roy C. Dalton et al., "William Bachelor Coltman," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (DCB) 6: 166.

21. W. B. Coltman to the agents of the North West Company, 27 December 1817, reprinted in *Papers Relating to the Red River Settlement*, 127.

22. For Coltman's defence of his approach to evidence, see NA, Colonial Office Records, MG 11, CO 42, Vol. 181, fol. 254, W. B. Coltman to Earl Bathurst, 30 November 1819.

23. See Sir William Holdsworth, *A History of the English Law* (London, 1926), 9: 210-11.

24. W. B. Coltman to the agents of the North West Company, 27 December 1817, reprinted in *Papers Relating to the Red River Settlement*, 127.

25. NA, Colonial Office Records, MG 11, CO 42, Vol. 181, fols. 3-17, W. B. Coltman to Sir J. C. Sherbrooke, 14 May 1818.

the allegations of "finishing-off" the wounded, the alleged mutilation and plunder of the bodies, and the claim that the Métis abandoned them on the field to be devoured by wild animals.

Coltman unambiguously concluded that the first shot was fired by the Selkirk party. He referred to testimony by two Métis witnesses that a member of Semple's party fired the first shot at François Boucher, a ball which passed so close that it caused him to fall off his horse. Joseph Pelletier also claimed that the Semple side fired a second shot at an Indian in the Métis camp, before the firing became general.²⁶ Three other witnesses gave similar testimony.²⁷ The Selkirk witness Michael Hayden disputed their testimony, but acknowledged that Lieutenant Holte of Semple's party had fired a shot beforehand by accident.²⁸ Coltman concluded that the weight of evidence obliged him to reject the allegation of a precipitous Métis attack.

On a strict examination of the evidence, the commissioner also concluded that the battle could not appropriately be considered a "massacre." Noting that the Semple side had begun the battle, he surmised that it continued until "the whole either fell or ran off." In his opinion the casualties on the Hudson's Bay side had been increased by their "standing together in a crowd, unaccustomed to the use of fire-arms, or any of the practices of irregular warfare," while their opponents were "all excellent marksmen, advantageously posted in superior numbers around their opponents, and accustomed as huntsmen, and from the habits of Indian warfare, to every device that could tend to their own preservation, or the destruction of their enemy."²⁹

On the other hand, in considering whether the wounded had been "finished off," Coltman found it self-evident that scarcely one half of those killed would have been mortally wounded by the first volley. He therefore concluded that the wounded must have been "finished off" after the outbreak of hostilities. Coltman judged that the evidence pointed to the northern members of the fur brigade; specifically mentioned were François Deschamps, a French-Canadian living in the Northwest, and three of his sons as the individuals responsible.³⁰ He attributed their actions to a Native custom of taking no prisoners, and suggested that a mercenary approach was the only security available to individuals operating in this context.

Coltman examined the issue of whether the wounded members of the Selkirk party tried to surrender, and concluded that the only two men to have done so were Pritchard, who was spared, and Rodgers, who was not. He noted that a number of Métis witnesses acknowledged that Rodgers had been finished off while pleading for mercy, but they identified "Grossetête," a son of Deschamps, as the guilty party. Coltman noted that

26. *Papers Relating to the Red River Settlement*, 190.

27. *Ibid.*, 188.

28. At the Seven Oaks trials at York, two Selkirk settlers, Winnifred McNolty and Hugh Ban-nerman, testified that Hayden had admitted to them that his own side fired the first shot. Amos, ed., *Report of the Trials*, 315-16, and *Report of the Proceedings Connected With the Dispute*, 192.

29. *Papers Relating to the Red River Settlement*, 192.

30. *Ibid.*, 219-20.

Hayden also gave contrary testimony, alleging a general massacre of wounded men trying to surrender, but he found Hayden to be an inaccurate witness.

Regarding the mutilation and pillaging of the dead bodies, Coltman concluded that these alleged occurrences were established by a "mass of evidence"; he cited nine depositions as proof. Yet, here again, he found it important to distinguish between the actions of particular individuals and the conduct of the group, as only a few persons were said to have "partaken of these spoils." The Deschamps were identified as the men carrying off the largest share of the plunder, although witnesses also claimed to have seen others with articles of clothing or arms.³¹

Coltman also examined the allegations of Frederick Damien Huerter that the Métis left the dead bodies of their fallen adversaries on the field for an extended period to be preyed upon by birds and animals. He referred to evidence to the contrary from both the Selkirk and Métis sides, which tended to confirm that the bodies were duly buried.³² He therefore considered Huerter's testimony to be coloured by "exaggeration," and also questioned this witness's reliability in that he had abandoned the service of one employer, the NWC, to become "an open and active partizan" of the HBC.³³

These highlights of Coltman's treatment of Seven Oaks hardly do justice to his extremely comprehensive analysis. Whatever his personal biases or the constraints of his mandate, his assemblage of a myriad of reported facts on Seven Oaks established most of the evidentiary base available to subsequent histories of this event. These data comprise much of the "story" to be considered in evaluating the "discourse" of the event's historians. His methods of collection, adducing, and evaluation of evidence also set a standard of historical research against which his successors might fairly be judged.

The indigenous historiography of Seven Oaks in Western Canada begins with Pierre Falcon's "Chanson de la Grenouillère," said to have been composed by a Métis witness immediately following the battle. Throughout the Red River period, and long afterward, the predominantly oral culture of the Métis preserved its memory of Seven Oaks by singing this song as an expression of ethnic pride and national identity.³⁴ Despite its status as an eye-witness account, or at least a version based on eye-witness accounts, it was almost never cited as a source in reconstructions of the event.³⁵

31. Ibid., 187, 191, 192, and 193.

32. NA, Fur Trade and Indian Records 1763-1867, MG 19, E 2, fols. 285-89, W. B. Coltman, "A General Statement and Report Relative to the Disturbances . . ."

33. Ibid., fols. 290-91.

34. Margaret Compkin, "Pierre Falcon's 'Chanson de la Grenouillère,'" *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Section 2 (1939): 49-58.

35. Numerous renditions of this song have followed its publication in the Québec folklorist François Larue's 1863 compilation, *Chansons populaires et historiques*. For historiographical purposes, an early handwritten copy and an 1871 published version transcribed from a performance by the author may be considered to be the most authentic. The handwritten version was among papers seized by Lord Selkirk at Fort William in 1816 and now found in NA, Selkirk Papers, MG 2, A 1, fols. 9207-08; the 1871 published counterpart is found in Joseph James Hargrave, *The Red River* (Montréal, 1871), 488-89.

With regard to its content, the song presented information on both the historical background and the event itself. Falcon treated the English as having come to pillage their country; he acknowledged that, prior to the engagement, the Métis had taken three prisoners; and he related that they discerned Semple's party as coming out to attack them, and that they turned to meet their adversaries. He stated that Semple ordered his men to fire on them, and recounted a number of other details, including an admission that the Métis killed most of Semple's men, chasing them from mound to mound.

On the level of discourse, Falcon's song made few concessions to rhetoric to enlist its audience's concurrence with its claims. The 1816 version was quite unpolished, showing irregular metrical patterns, imperfect rhyming, and an absence of alliteration. The contents of this hastily composed account evidently were determined more by the desire to relate particular details than the discourse needs of a particular literary structure.

Jan Vansina has drawn attention to the pitfalls of relying exclusively on oral tradition as historical evidence. In being passed on from the original observer to others by word of mouth, a story is reinterpreted by each performer in the chain of transmission.³⁶ Yet Falcon's song is a rare example of oral tradition on a historical event for which there is also voluminous textual evidence. Note that, in a number of its details, it corresponds closely to sworn testimony at the trials in central Canada and depositions taken by Commissioners Coltman and Fletcher. Its significance as a historical source derives principally from its status as an authentic expression of Métis perceptions and attitudes toward the events of 19 June 1816.

Alexander Ross's 1856 book *The Red River Settlement* is the first published account by an author from the region. Moreover, it is apparently the first account to rely largely on written evidence: the only specific references he cites are to a published transcription of the trials. Ross also pioneered in making Seven Oaks an episode in a structured version of the region's history, and in self-consciously employing literary models to this end.

Ross's interpretive framework is uncomplicated: it is a straightforward expression of the theme of "civilisation versus savagery" which was to become so prominent in Western Canadian historiography. On the critical issue of who initiated hostilities, Ross asserted that "there has never been a shadow of doubt . . . that the North-West Company did unquestionably fire the first shot, and almost all the shots that were fired."³⁷ As evidence, he cited both the testimony of Michael Hayden at the Seven Oaks murder trials in Canada, and Chief Justice Powell's charge to the jury, in which Powell is said to have accepted Hayden's testimony that the Métis fired the first two shots. (Ross here seems to have misread the transcript. Powell clearly states that the evidence on this point is contradictory.³⁸) There is no reference to Coltman's report or any suggestion that Ross read it.

36. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London, 1985), 29.

37. Alexander Ross, *The Red River Settlement: Its Rise, Progress, and Present State, With Some Account of the Native Races and its General History, to the Present Day* (London, 1856), 36-37.

38. Amos, ed., *Report of the Trials*, 173-74.

What Ross's account lacked in empirical data it made up in imaginative conjecture. The final "proof" offered of the North West Company's guilt was the author's assertion that twenty-six of Semple's opponents at Seven Oaks subsequently met violent or sudden deaths. Ross took their supposed fate as confirmation of a kind of divine retribution on sinners.³⁹ His foray into occult models of historical explanation has been reproduced occasionally over the course of Seven Oaks historiography, in books by J. J. Hargrave, Mercer Adam, George Bryce, A. C. Garrioch and, most recently, Peter C. Newman.⁴⁰

Ross's account of Seven Oaks cannot be separated from the overall narrative structure of his book. For him, Western Canadian history began with the granting of the Hudson's Bay Company charter in 1670, while he hailed the "real object" of Selkirk's scheme as "the pious and philanthropic desire of introducing civilization into the wilderness."⁴¹ The remainder of his book elaborated this theme. It was a sustained effort by Ross to privilege his own European ethnicity in opposition to the posited savagery of all Native peoples within the Red River settlement, including persons of mixed race.

The narrative purpose of these assorted characterisations becomes apparent at the end of the book, when a discussion of the Pembina Métis functions to set off the hero of Ross's narrative, the entrepreneur Alexander McDermot. The Métis are presented as creatures of whim, contrasting with the purposeful entrepreneurship of McDermot.⁴² These depictions function as a backdrop to Ross's advocacy of several causes, including an enforced dispersal and separation of Native groups from the colony and the transfer of oligarchic control from the HBC to a core of formally educated residents such as himself.

Ross's partisan conclusions could command credibility because the book was published in London for an audience with little knowledge of the region or people he was writing about. The subordination of Seven Oaks to ideological imperatives far removed from the original disputes within which it occurred was a tradition which prevailed after 1870. While Ross was not an academic, his interpretations were embraced by post-Confederation professional and popular historians alike, and provided the basis for many of the stereotypes of the Métis that would be reproduced over and over again, to infinite regress.

A contemporary of Ross, Donald Gunn took a different approach to the representation of Seven Oaks. While Gunn's account was not published until 1880, it reflected

39. Ibid., 37-40.

40. Hargrave, *The Red River*, 489-91; G. Mercer Adam, *The Canadian North-West: Its History and its Troubles: The Narrative of Three Insurrections* (Toronto, 1885), 123; George Bryce, *Mackenzie, Selkirk, Simpson* (Toronto, 1909), 184; A. C. Garrioch, *The Correction Line* (Winnipeg, 1933), 39-41; and Peter C. Newman, *Caesars of the Wilderness* (Toronto, 1987), 175.

41. Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, 18. Ross's constructions of the Métis role at Seven Oaks and on other occasions reveal the "cultural ambivalence" that Sylvia Van Kirk has described in an insightful article on his family; see "'What if Mama is an Indian?': The Cultural Ambivalence of the Alexander Ross Family," in *The Developing West: Essays in Honour of L. H. Thomas*, ed. John E. Foster (Edmonton, 1983), 125-36.

42. Ross, *The Red River Settlement*, 404 and 401.

local knowledge of the event and belongs to Red River historiography rather than the Canadian period after 1870. Gunn's career in Red River paralleled Ross's in a number of respects, in that he settled there in the 1820s, served as a teacher and magistrate in the community, and was critical of the Hudson's Bay Company's role in the settlement.⁴³ Unlike Ross, however, he did not aspire to political dominance in the community, and his writing reflects his more populist sympathies.

Gunn's *History of Manitoba*⁴⁴ differs from Ross's treatment in more than its interpretive conclusions. It reflects a completely different approach to collecting and presenting evidence and to the ways in which the author inserted Seven Oaks into his larger text. Gunn presented the battle as the culmination of a series of aggressions committed by the HBC on the NWC. Noting an initial lack of animosity between the NWC and the Selkirk settlers, he attributed the deterioration in their relations to attempts by Selkirk to use Red River as a base from which to destroy the Nor'-Westers' trade. Among the listed HBC "outrages" was Miles Macdonell's "Pemmican Proclamation" which, in his view, inflamed the situation to the point of confrontation.

Regarding Seven Oaks, his approach was to present two versions of the event — one from the HBC sympathizer John Pritchard, and the other from the North West Company side. He referred to evidence assembled after the coalition of the two companies: "When party interest required no longer to be propped up by any fabrications that would serve that purpose, all parties agreed in acknowledging that the first shot was from Lieutenant Holt's piece, which went off accidentally."⁴⁵ Gunn limited himself to a discussion of actions, without resorting to ontological explanations of innate Native savagery, as in Ross's account. Nor is there an obvious "point" to his history, which simply ends in 1835 without interpretive conclusions.

Gunn's more pluralistic approach was echoed by one other Red River historian, J. J. Hargrave. The son of Chief Factor James Hargrave and himself an employee of the HBC,⁴⁶ Hargrave, unlike Ross or Gunn, was a HBC sympathizer. His account of Seven Oaks reflected the company's viewpoint, although his relegation of the discussion to an appendix suggests the minor significance attributed to the event in the Red River era.⁴⁷ Hargrave summarised the respective versions of both sides of the conflict and also reproduced Falcon's song, observing that it "gives, I have no doubt, a truthful description of the light in which the author, along with doubtless the majority of his comrades, regarded the appearance and intentions of Governor Semple and his followers."⁴⁸ Never again was Falcon's song accorded credibility as a legitimate account of the Seven Oaks incident. Nor, with the exception of Ross, were any of the other amateur versions from the pre-1870 era given legitimacy as historical accounts.

In 1870 the HBC ceded Rupert's Land to Britain, Britain transferred it to Canada, and the Red River colony ceased to be. Within only two decades, the large-scale influx

43. L. G. Thomas, "Donald Gunn," *DCB* 10: 324.

44. Donald Gunn and Charles R. Tuttle, *History of Manitoba* (Ottawa, 1880).

45. *Ibid.*, 107-08 and 149.

46. Glen Makahonuk, "Joseph James Hargrave," *DCB* 12: 408-09.

47. Hargrave, *The Red River*, 485-91.

48. *Ibid.*, 487-88.

of Anglo-Ontarian immigrants radically altered Manitoba's ethnic mix from a mixed-blood majority of Red River settlers with approximate parity in numbers between French and English, to the overwhelming dominance of the white, Anglo-Canadian newcomers. These new arrivals rapidly became the region's ruling group. While they claimed the region's best farmlands⁴⁹ and established their business dominance in the cities,⁵⁰ they nevertheless lacked the cultural traditions that could legitimise their political and economic power. Their writers, and particularly their historians, played a key role in constructing these traditions, and Seven Oaks figured prominently in their work.

In constructing a historical role for the Anglo-Canadian newcomers, no other writer matched the contributions of George Bryce. The first professional historian in Western Canada, the founder of Manitoba College, cofounder of the University of Manitoba, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Canada, the first president of the Manitoba Historical Society and, later, president of the Royal Society of Canada,⁵¹ Bryce was positioned to rewrite the region's history from the perspective of his own ethnic group and class. He wrote for a mass readership across the new Dominion of Canada. His work represents a formal departure, as it constitutes the first fully realised integration of the event within the narrative structures of European literature.

The quantity of texts Bryce produced on Seven Oaks and the Selkirk settlement reveals the enormous significance he placed on this event and period. He left six published accounts of the incident, more than any other historian.⁵² To Bryce, Seven Oaks was "the most notable event that ever occurred on the prairies of Rupert's Land or in the limits of the fur country,"⁵³ and "the most shocking episode that ever occurred in North-Western history."⁵⁴

Seven Oaks assumed significance in Bryce's books to the extent that his narrativisation of Métis violence and lawlessness in 1816 functioned to explain the conflicts of 1869-70 and 1885. In a paper read only a few weeks after Louis Riel's execution, Bryce stated:

Having tasted blood in the death of Governor Semple they were turbulent ever after.
Living the life of buffalo hunters they preserved their warlike tastes . . . It needs not

49. See Lyle Dick, *Farmers "Making Good"* (Ottawa, 1989), Chap. 1, and "Factors Affecting Prairie Settlement: A Case Study of Abernethy, Saskatchewan in the 1880s," *Historical Papers/Communications historiques* (1985): 11-28.

50. See Alan F. J. Artibise, *Winnipeg: A Social History of Urban Growth* (Montréal, 1975), 23-37.

51. Henry J. Morgan, ed., *Canadian Men and Women of the Time* (Toronto, 1912), 163-64; George Bryce, *A History of Manitoba, Its Resources and People* (Toronto/Montréal, 1906), 689-92.

52. Bryce's versions of Seven Oaks appear in the following: *Manitoba: Its Infancy, Growth, and Present Condition* (London, 1882), 213-35; *Mackenzie, Selkirk, Simpson, 177-84*; *A History of Manitoba, Its Resources and People*, 80-85; *The Remarkable History of the Hudson's Bay Company*, 3rd ed., 80-85; *The Romantic Settlement of Lord Selkirk's Colonists (The Pioneers of Manitoba)* (Toronto, 1909), 117-32; and *The Life of Lord Selkirk: Colonizer of Western Canada* (Toronto, 1912), 67-73.

53. *A History of Manitoba, Its Resources and People*, 80.

54. *The Romantic Settlement of Lord Selkirk's Colonists*, 133.

that I should recite to you the doings in the rebellion of 1869-70, it was simply the outbreak of the "Seven Oaks" and "Sayer" affair again. A too generous Government overlooked the serious nature of those events. It was reserved for what we may trust may be the last manifestation of this unruly spirit existent for three quarters of a century to show itself on the banks of the Saskatchewan in 1885.⁵⁵

Bryce's plot form is the romance, a construction of the region's past as a struggle between forces of light and darkness.⁵⁶ In his narratives, Selkirk and his settlers were the unproblematic heroes, and the North West Company and the Métis the villains, underscored by their putative role at Seven Oaks.⁵⁷ Bryce's approach to historical evidence was also quite straightforward: in researching Seven Oaks, he simply looked for testimony from the Selkirk side alleging Métis savagery, quoted it at length, and ignored contrary evidence. His reliance on three witnesses in particular suggests that he found all he needed in a collection of partisan testimonies compiled by John Halkett,⁵⁸ Selkirk's brother-in-law and ghost writer.⁵⁹ By quoting testimony from only one side, Bryce was able to rewrite the history of Seven Oaks to incorporate all of the old Selkirk party's allegations which had been rejected by Coltman and called into question by the Red River historiography. For example, he revived the charge that the Métis fired the first shot,⁶⁰ and Huerter's assertions that the Métis deliberately left the bodies on the field for the scavenging animals.

The allegorical function of these details was revealed in the concluding chapters to Bryce's books, as he introduced the collective hero for whom the Selkirk settlers were earlier stand-ins: "What, then, is to be the future of this Canadian West? The possibilities are illimitable. The Anglo-Saxon race, with its energy and pluck, has laid hold of the land so long shut in by the wall built around it by the fur traders. This race, with its dominating forcefulness, will absorb and harmonize elements coming from all parts of the world"⁶¹ This justification for conquest explains Bryce's narrativisations of Seven Oaks. Just as a heroic role needed to be accorded Anglo-Canadians and their

55. George Bryce, *The old settlers of Red River, a paper read before the Society on the evening of 26th November 1885* (Winnipeg, 1885), 6. In 1903, he reiterated this interpretation: "their attack on Fort Douglas, in 1816, gave them a reputation for turbulence, which again showed itself in the rebellions of 1849, 1869, 1885." See his "Intrusive Ethnological Types in Rupert's Land," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Section 2 (1903): 412. Contemporaries who also attributed the conflicts of 1869-70 and 1885 to the unleashing of Métis turbulence at Seven Oaks include John Reade, "The Half-Breed," *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Section 2 (1885): 12 and G. Mercer Adam, *The Canadian North-West*.
56. For a discussion of the formal characteristics of the romance genre, see Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976).
57. Essentially, the Métis role is constructed from stereotypes originating with Ross. See *Manitoba: Its Infancy, Growth, and Present Condition*, 200 and 204.
58. *Narratives of John Pritchard, Pierre Chrysologue Pambrun and Frederick Damien Huerter, Respecting the Aggressions of the North-West [sic] Company Against the Earl of Selkirk's Settlement Upon Red River* (London, 1819).
59. W. S. Wallace, "Lord Selkirk's Ghost Writer," *The Beaver* 271, No. 2 (September 1940): 31.
60. See, for example, *Manitoba: Its Infancy, Growth, and Present Condition*, 223; Mackenzie, *Selkirk, Simpson*, 181; *A History of Manitoba, Its Resources and People*, 81-82.
61. Bryce, *A History of Manitoba, Its Resources and People*, 306.

imaginary ancestors, the Selkirk settlers, so the Métis needed to be presented as lawless, violent, unstable, and irresponsible — in short, as embodying the attributes considered antithetical to the new Anglo-Canadian business civilisation. Representing Seven Oaks as a “massacre” was therefore integral to the construction of a new master narrative of progress in the West.

Bryce set the tone for the subsequent English-language historiography of Seven Oaks. With the notable exception of the amateur Charles Napier Bell,⁶² Bryce’s Anglo-Canadian contemporaries adhered to his interpretation, and it became entrenched as the orthodox version in academic, popular, and novelistic treatments of the event.⁶³

With the work of Chester Martin, the academic historiography of Seven Oaks moves from the overdetermined figural language of Bryce and his contemporaries to the assumed neutrality of the plain prose discourse.⁶⁴ Born in Nova Scotia, Martin established the Department of History at the University of Manitoba and taught there until 1929. His obituary in the *Canadian Historical Review* in 1958 characterised him as “a disciple of the school of ‘objective history’.”⁶⁵ Yet Martin was also identified with the revival of British imperial sentiment in the early-twentieth century.⁶⁶ His choice of the biographical form for his book *Lord Selkirk’s Work in Canada*⁶⁷ and his pres-

62. Emigrating from Perth, Ontario to Manitoba in 1870, Bell was a cofounder and president of the Manitoba Historical Society and a fellow of various geographical societies in the United States and Europe. His account of Seven Oaks appears in his pamphlet, *The Selkirk Settlement and the Settlers: A Concise History of the Red River Country From its Discovery, Including Information Extracted from Original Documents Lately Discovered and Notes Obtained From Selkirk Settlement Colonists* (Winnipeg, 1887). Basing his conclusions on oral and documentary research, he acknowledged that “it is difficult to get at the exact truth of what followed this meeting of the rival traders” (17). He therefore quotes representative eyewitness accounts from both sides — the familiar testimony of John Pritchard favoured by pro-Selkirk historians, and a statement by François Firman Boucher of the North West Company. He added that “many of the settlers are of the opinion that the first shot fired was by Lieut. Holte, whose gun went off by accident, thus precipitating the conflict” (19).

63. See Alexander Begg, *History of the North-West* (Toronto, 1894), 183; F. H. Schofield, *The Story of Manitoba* (Chicago, 1913), 1: 138; Robert B. Hill, *Manitoba: History of Its Early Settlement, Development, and Resources* (Toronto, 1890), 50-56; Louis Aubrey Wood, *The Red River Colony: A Chronicle of the Beginnings of Manitoba* (Toronto, 1915), 91-107; and John Perry Pritchard, *The Red River Valley, 1811-1849: A Regional Study* (New York, 1942), 162-80. Among the many fictional accounts acknowledging their debt to Bryce or reproducing the essentials of his accounts include Agnes C. Laut, *Lords of the North* (Toronto, 1900), v; J. H. McCulloch, *The Men of Kildonan: A Romance of the Selkirk Settlers* (New York, 1926), vii; Frederick Niven, *Mine Inheritance* (London, 1940), 285-88; John Jennings, *The Strange Brigade: A Story of the Red River and the Opening of the Canadian West* (Boston, 1952), 367; and J. W. Chalmers, *Red River Adventures: The Story of the Selkirk Settlers* (Toronto, 1952), 99-103.

64. See Robert Adolph, *The Rise of the Modern Prose Style* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), and Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, 1978), 94-95.

65. *Canadian Historical Review* 39:3 (September 1958): 264.

66. Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power* (Toronto, 1970), 215.

67. Chester Martin, *Lord Selkirk’s Work in Canada* (Oxford, 1916).

entation of Selkirk as an unproblematic hero were evidence of the continuation of the romance genre even within the school of "scientific history."

Martin's work on Selkirk was extensively footnoted and was written in a measured, apparently nonrhetorical style. Its hidden rhetoric can only be apprehended by a careful reading of its textual signifying practices. Martin structured the paragraph comprising his narrative of Seven Oaks into a sequence of sentences which individually and cumulatively signify aggression by the Métis and passivity on the HBC—Selkirk side. For example, he referred to Semple's seeing the "formidable numbers and attitude of his opponents," while "panic-stricken settlers" confirmed an impending Métis attack on the colony. The statement that "Semple soon found himself surrounded" reinforces his party's implied passivity, while the passive voice was also used to refer to the outbreak of gunfire: "There was a shot and then a general fusillade. The first to fall was Lieutenant Holte of the colony, but in a few minutes," says Pritchard, "'almost all our people were either killed or wounded'."⁶⁸

This construction avoided the issue of who fired the first shot. The implication of the second sentence is that the Métis not only fired the first shot, but immediately followed with a coordinated round of gunfire, a predetermined military manoeuvre which explains the heavy casualties. This implication contrasts with one of Martin's footnotes, which referred to "the usual conflict of evidence regarding the first shot" but acknowledged that it was fired by one of Semple's men, "perhaps accidentally."

Martin's book on Selkirk provided an academic justification for the standard Anglo-Canadian interpretation of the battle. While he avoided the use of the term "massacre," his grammatical and syntactical techniques of representation pointed to this conclusion. The apparent contradictions between his text and footnotes suggest the author's unconscious ambivalence toward his own reconstruction; yet readers were left with their preconceptions of the battle essentially undisturbed.

Outside the Anglo-Canadian discourse, an alternative historiography on Seven Oaks emerged in this period in French-language accounts by Franco-Manitoban and Métis amateur historians. These writers included Louis-Arthur Prud'homme, a francophone judge who wrote extensively on Métis and other aboriginal topics from the time of his arrival in St. Boniface in 1880,⁶⁹ and Auguste-Henri de Trémaudan, whose *Histoire de la Nation Métisse*⁷⁰ was commissioned by the Union Nationale Métisse Saint-Joseph de Manitoba. Both of these accounts relied heavily on the Coltman report. Prud'homme's article in particular was a closely reasoned analysis, with little overt use of rhetoric.⁷¹

68. Ibid., 111.

69. L'abbé Elie-J. Auclair, "L'honorable Juge Prud'homme," *Mémoires de la Société Royale du Canada*, Section 1, Série III, 35 (1941): 135-40; Morgan, *Canadian Men and Women of the Time*, 921.

70. Auguste-Henri de Trémaudan, *Histoire de la nation métisse dans l'ouest canadien* (Montréal, 1935), 105-12.

71. L.-A. Prud'homme, "L'engagement des Sept Chênes," *Mémoires de la Société Royale du Canada*, Section 1, Série III, 12 (décembre 1918/mars 1919): 165-88.

As in Bell's pamphlet, the paper ended with a discussion of his sources, directing attention back to its evidentiary base. Neither of these works appears to have figured in any of the subsequent accounts of Seven Oaks.

De Trémaudan's book received a mixed review in the *Canadian Historical Review* in the same issue in which a very positive review of George Stanley's *The Birth of Western Canada* appeared.⁷² Unlike the two francophone accounts, this book was to have a major impact on the historiography of the Métis. In uncritically reproducing stereotypes from Alexander Ross,⁷³ Stanley helped perpetuate the conventional wisdom of Métis inferiority in Anglo-Canadian discourse. He referred to Seven Oaks as a "massacre" and, like Martin, avoided assigning responsibility by resorting to a passive construction: "A gun was fired." As with Bryce, he was principally concerned with impressing on readers a connection between Seven Oaks, Métis "turbulence," and 1885: "Seven Oaks was only the first of several demonstrations by the half-breeds against the settlement of their country by the whites, and was, in consequence, the forerunner of the Riel Rebellions of 1869-70 and 1885."⁷⁴

In 1939 the Hudson's Bay Record Society published the HBC trader Colin Robertson's correspondence book from 1817 to 1822, edited by the distinguished British economic historian E. E. Rich. This was the first time since Seven Oaks that Hudson's Bay Company documents pertaining to the event were published for general research use. Their interest resides in Rich's conclusion that the evidence confirmed that the HBC party initiated the shooting. Among the documents he published was a letter by Robertson, dated December 1818, in which he referred to "the accidental shot from the musquet of the deceased Maroni."⁷⁵ In the footnote to this statement, Rich identified "Maroni" as Patrick Maroonney, a member of the Semple party who was killed at Seven Oaks. He added that "this reference would seem to point to Patrick Maroonney as firing the first shot." Rich also quoted from a contemporary report by the HBC Factor James Bird, who wrote of the altercation between Boucher and Semple: "the insolence of this man [Boucher] so irritated some of the party which accompanied Mr. Semple that they rashly fired on the Half-breeds who stood round and who had hitherto remained quiet spectators of the scuffle with Boucher."⁷⁶ These testimonies are conspicuous by their absence in the subsequent historiography of Seven Oaks.

In 1945, Marcel Giraud published his monumental doctoral thesis, *Le Métis canadien*.⁷⁷ It has been long held that this study presented a more sympathetic portrait of the Métis than had appeared in Anglo-Canadian writing. Reliance on Hudson's Bay Company primary sources and secondary works by Ross, Bryce, Agnes C. Laut, Martin, A. S. Morton, and Stanley helped ensure, however, that his interpretations were in the mainstream of the Anglo-Canadian discourse.

72. *Canadian Historical Review* 17:4 (December 1936): 452-54 and 454-57.

73. George F. G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada* (Toronto, 1936). 6-9.

74. *Ibid.*, 11 and 12.

75. E. E. Rich, ed., *Colin Robertson's Correspondence Book, September 1817 to September 1822* (London, 1939), 27.

76. *Ibid.*, 27, n. 2.

77. Marcel Giraud, *Le Métis canadien: son rôle dans l'histoire de provinces de l'Ouest* (Paris, 1945).

The consistency of Giraud's interpretation with Anglo-Canadian writing on the event is immediately suggested in his terminology. Where Martin had been careful to avoid the loaded term "massacre," Giraud underlined this interpretation by entitling a chapter section "Le Massacre De La Grenouillère," and repeatedly invoking the term throughout his discussion.⁷⁸ These lexical signifiers were reinforced by grammatical use. Specifically, on the question of the first shot, Giraud obfuscated. After describing the angry exchange between Boucher and Semple and the governor's seizing Boucher's bridle, he stated that at this moment "des coups de feu éclatèrent." As with Martin and Stanley, he resorted to a passive construction to sidestep the problem of attributing responsibility, and added that since the eye-witness testimony was contradictory, it was impossible to verify where the shots came from. He supported his equivocation by referring to four sources: John Bird's "Edmonton Report" and depositions by Michael Hayden, John Pritchard, and Joseph Pelletier. Of these witnesses, Pelletier attributed the first shot to the Semple party, Bird's report was a tacit admission from a HBC employee that his own side fired first, and Pritchard testified that he could not tell which side initiated the gunfire. This leaves only Hayden (who had been discredited as an unreliable witness by Coltman) asserting that the Métis fired the first shot. Giraud then focused on the supposed inability of the Métis to restrain innate savage impulses, reflected in alleged mutilation of the bodies: "l'action une fois engagée, ces natures simples, dépourvues de conviction religieuse, parurent donner libre cours à l'instinct sauvage que les North-Westers avaient éveillé en eux. Leur barbarie s'exprima dans la mutilation des cadavres."⁷⁹

Presenting Seven Oaks as a manifestation of instinctive Métis savagery was consistent with English-language versions from the time of Bryce. Giraud's contribution was to give renewed credibility to the old stereotypes by providing both extensive footnoting and the scientific gloss of eugenics theory.⁸⁰ His overarching thesis of the Métis as the inherently flawed product of an unsound racial mixture was not based on rigorous biological or social science, so much as it derived from the encrusted prejudices of half a century of Anglo-Canadian writing on this mixed-blood group.

The Anglo-Canadian historiography of Seven Oaks culminates in the work of W. L. Morton. Morton was the most prominent post-Second-World-War historian in and of Western Canada, and he was the only regional historian to whom Carl Berger devoted an entire chapter in his *The Writing of Canadian History*. Morton wrote two versions of the battle, a shorter account in his survey history of Manitoba and a more substantial narrative in a book on Cuthbert Grant.

Recent scholarship has credited Morton's account in *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown* with being the "most detailed reconstruction of Seven Oaks,"⁸¹ but it is consistent with

78. Ibid., 1: 591, 594, and 596.

79. Ibid., 1: 594 and 596.

80. Eugenics, an ideology and programme of fostering racial betterment by genetic manipulation, generated an enormous literature in the early-twentieth century. See Samuel J. Holmes, *A Bibliography of Eugenics* (Berkeley, 1924).

81. J. M. Bumsted, "Introduction," *The Collected Works of Lord Selkirk, 1810-1820* (Winnipeg, 1987), 2: lxxxix, n. 285. The narrative in *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown* has been attributed incorrectly to both Morton and his coauthor, the amateur historian Margaret Arnett MacLeod.

the version in his provincial history, albeit with more detail and footnotes. As with Martin, Stanley, and Giraud, he employed passive constructions and apologies to soften the impact of the Semple party's firing the first shot, while shifting the emphasis to an assumed coordinated response. Morton discussed the killing of Semple and correctly attributed it to either Deschamps or Machicabou, an Indian. Nevertheless, he proceeded to extend the responsibility for this "savagery" to the entire group of Métis: "This piece of savagery was matched elsewhere. The wounded were knifed and tomahawked, the dead stripped and ripped up after the Indian fashion. The wild blood of the *brûlés* was boiling, and it was some time before Grant could check their savagery." Grant's entire party was also presented as a wild group of plunderers.⁸²

Beyond attributing savagery to the entire group, the author presented them as a continuing menace to the colonists. He referred to the settlers' "terror-stricken night"; the "horrors of the massacre"; and the "horror of the colonists."⁸³ Morton asked: "What pity for man or woman could be expected from these savages?" Grant was presented as mercifully in control of his men; otherwise, it was implied, they would have massacred the entire settlement. Morton also discussed the appearance of the bodies after they were brought in: "Some of them were naked, some mutilated, all rent by spear or knife. The spectacle completed the terror of the colonists."⁸⁴

Morton's views on the Métis role at Seven Oaks are clear enough from his reconstruction in *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown* but, as a collaborative text, the book does not reveal his reasons for this interpretation. An answer is found in his *Manitoba: A History*, in which a similar version of Seven Oaks was narrativised as part of a much larger interpretive framework.

Here, the selected form of emplotment was the epic, essentially a monumental prose poem narrating the progress of a hero. While the epic form all but disappeared in Europe with the rise of professional history in the early-nineteenth century, in North America it was given new life by the nation-building preoccupations of the occupying Anglo-Saxon groups in the United States.⁸⁵ In a similar way, Morton's book represents the deployment of an antiquated literary form to advance the historical role of his ethnic group, class, and profession.

Morton plotted *Manitoba: A History* as a succession of dialectical struggles between what he considered to be the progressive and reactionary forces at each stage of the historical process. In each successive era, the mode of production and social organisation

In the preface to the second edition, Morton disassociated himself from what he considered MacLeod's overly romantic view of Grant as a "heroic" figure, and he assumed sole responsibility for authoring various chapters, including the one which treats Seven Oaks. See W. L. Morton, "Introduction to the Carleton Library Edition," in Morton and MacLeod, *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown* (Toronto, 1974), ix-xv.

82. Morton and MacLeod, *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown*, 49.

83. Ibid., 51 and 52.

84. Ibid., 51-52.

85. At least five leading American historians of the nineteenth century wrote epic histories to reflect the national experience of the United States. See Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago, 1983), 255-56.

considered to advance society swept away the old order. For example, the Métis were accorded a role in the Red River period but, by 1870, they were viewed as resisting progress, and had to be turned out. This narrative structure required that the Métis be presented in a negative light before the reader reaches the critical years of 1869-70 in the text. Accordingly, they were thematised as wild men throughout the approximately eighty pages devoted to the Red River period. This was achieved through the simple device of applying a large number of adjectives signifying their alleged unruliness and irresponsibility.⁸⁶

The function of Seven Oaks within the larger narrative is revealed when Morton referred to the "sudden and deadly burst of passion" at Seven Oaks, a foreshadowing of the subsequent reference to the execution of Thomas Scott as a "sudden return to violence by Riel." He asked: "Why the resistance, hitherto so restrained rose so suddenly to this pitch of brutal violence, is an obscure and complex question," and then answered by attributing the violence to "the divisions and instability of his [Riel's] own people."⁸⁷ He thereby echoed the interpretation he advanced in reviewing Giraud's book in 1950: "it was their tragedy that the instability and violence of Riel, reflecting the inherent instability and ready violence of his own uncertain people, ruined his achievement and destroyed his nation."⁸⁸

Morton's narrativisation of Seven Oaks can therefore be seen as integral to the discrediting of the legitimacy of the Riel Resistance and, by extension, the Métis rights it represented. Here Giraud's assertions of an inherent Métis instability and tendency to violence provided Morton with all that was required to justify their suppression in 1870 and, by implication, 1885.

Morton's version of Seven Oaks reveals a deeper allegorical structure beyond these narrative functions, which it shares with the broader Anglo-Canadian discourse. One has only to compare the optimistic tone of the conclusions to Bryce's books with the pessimism evident in Morton's concluding jeremiad to perceive that a very different conception is at work. That his text went beyond the agendas of the Anglo-Canadian discourse is also evident from a comparison of stereotypes in the respective accounts. Where such writers as Ross, Bryce, and Stanley presented the Métis in terms of both positive and negative stereotypes as a combination of Wild Man and Noble Savage, Morton's characterisation was almost uniformly negative.

86. W. L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto, 1957). The adjectives used to depict the Métis include six applications of the term "wild" — twice on page 51 and on pages 56, 62, 65, and 70; one instance of "half-wild" (56); one case of "Ishmaelite wildness" (67); four instances of "turbulent" (56, 70, 102, and 119); another of "turbulent and lawless" (82); and references to "barbarism" (56 and 62), "but half-won from barbarism" (39), and "slovenly barbarism" (90). Other modifiers used for the Métis include "slovenliness" (65), "volatile" (77), "fickle" (63), "careless and amiable" (63), "restless" (102), "reckless" (145), "insouciant" (66), and "lawless" (61 and 64). He also refers to their "divisions and instability" (138) and to their "primitive and slovenly agriculture" (88), and speaks of "a lazy fecklessness a Métis could not have exceeded" (67).

87. *Ibid.*, 54, 136, 138, and 137.

88. W. L. Morton, "The Canadian Métis," *The Beaver* 281 (September 1950): 7.

Why Morton resorted to such hyperbole might well have had less to do with the Métis than a preoccupation with a perceived decline in the position of his own ethnic group and profession in the twentieth century. Morton's uneasiness with the increasingly multicultural composition of the province after 1900 is reflected in the statement that "many of them were to be alien in origin and of faiths and traditions unknown to the West, and with their coming was to begin a testing of the Canadian nationality such as it had not yet undergone." Here "Canadian nationality" signifies *Anglo-Canadian* nationality. Later, he referred to the "the gulf between the immigrant and the Canadian-born generation breaching family ties, delinquency among the younger generation, the decline of politeness, the debasement of English speech," and so on. Similarly decried was the decline in status of the academy: "The decadence of intellectual standards, the maintenance of which was the greatest need of a society emerging from pioneering, was increased by the contempt in which a materialistic community held the teaching profession. The really fine achievement of the University of Manitoba in its first generation was similarly threatened." Just as he wistfully recalled the leading role of the university in Bryce's day, he nostalgically looked back to the privileged role of Ross and other retired fur traders, men of "prestige and means" and "the natural aristocracy of the primitive community of Red River" in their own era.⁸⁹

These assorted statements point to the author's deeper narrative purpose. In his statement quoted at the beginning of this paper, Morton suggested that historians had neglected their responsibility to produce "myths" to counter the "decadence" of the age. His own narrativisation of Seven Oaks approached the mythical in *Manitoba: A History*, a romantic epic in which the role attributed to the Métis functioned to set off the text's implied hero, an Anglo-Canadian aristocracy for the West.

Morton's account of Seven Oaks in *Cuthbert Grant of Grantown* was apparently the last detailed treatment of the event by a Manitoba-born Anglo-Canadian. Its status as the last archivally based version has ensured a continuation of elements of the Anglo-Canadian tradition in historical writing to the present. Morton's interpretation of a "massacre" survived in Frits Pannekoek's recently published study on the origins of the Red River Resistance,⁹⁰ and a current francophone history of St. Boniface relied on Giraud and Morton as sources on Seven Oaks.⁹¹ In varying degrees the Anglo-Canadian version is also in evidence in current survey textbooks in Canadian history.⁹²

89. Morton, *Manitoba: A History*, 274, 467, and 67.

90. Note Pannekoek's reproduction of Morton's terminology ("the horrors of the Seven Oaks Massacre") in *A Snug Little Flock: The Social Origins of the Riel Resistance of 1869-70* (Winnipeg, 1991), 76.

91. Luc Dauphinais, *Histoire de Saint-Boniface*, tome I, *À l'ombre des cathédrales* (Saint-Boniface, 1991), 45-46.

92. For example, the revised edition of J. M. S. Careless's *Canada: A Story of Challenge* (Toronto, 1974) characterises Seven Oaks as a "massacre" (143), while Desmond Morton's *A Short History of Canada* (Edmonton, 1983) perpetuates the image of the Métis as North West Company dupes who "shot down twenty-one men from the colony and mutilated some of the corpses" (66). Even J. L. Finlay and D. N. Sprague's *The Structure of Canadian History* (Scarborough, 1979), an account generally sympathetic to the Métis, states that the incident is remembered as an "atrocious" and a "massacre" (104).

Some regional histories of the fur trade or Western Canada have been more discriminating but they, too, reveal the influence of this tradition. For example, in his book on the Western Canadian fur trade, Daniel Francis reproduced the passive equivocation ("A shot was fired"),⁹³ as did Gerald Friesen in his textbook on prairie history. In chiding other writers for their use of the term "massacre,"⁹⁴ Friesen has been more judicious than most. Friesen's and Francis's treatments do not consciously conform to the master narrative but, as syntheses of secondary materials, these versions are unavoidably dependent on the existing literature.

Today, exaggerated accounts of Métis "savagery" persist only in popular works by authors such as George Woodcock or Peter C. Newman,⁹⁵ or in fictional accounts, as in a particularly lurid version in a recent romance novel.⁹⁶ Writing on Seven Oaks appears to have come full circle. Anglo-Canadian academics seized control of the incident's historiography from Red River amateurs in the period between 1870 and 1970 but, in the last twenty years amateurs have returned to the fore. Where the nineteenth-century writers exemplified *vernacular* or grass-roots approaches to historical writing, however, the more recent amateur historians fall into the category of *popular* writing, essentially comprising the popular reproduction of conventional wisdom.⁹⁷ In stretching the gulf between story and discourse to absurd lengths, the popular historians have only extended a process of textual reification, pioneered by the Anglo-Canadian academics and entrenched in a discursive tradition of a hundred years duration.

The voluminous literature on the Seven Oaks incident illuminates far more than the event of Seven Oaks, and broadly bears on the practice of historical writing as it evolved in Western Canada. In different but complementary ways, each of the nineteenth-century amateur texts on Seven Oaks, apart from Ross, contributed suggestive models as to how writing on history within the region might otherwise have developed. Coltman contributed the judicial techniques of comprehensive compilation and review of all the available evidence and subjection of the data to the rigorous standards of courtroom examination. Falcon's "Chanson de la Grenouillère" constituted both an eye-witness account and a folk memory of one of the groups participating in the event. Gunn and Hargrave acknowledged the existence of more than one viewpoint on the event, while C. N. Bell took the remarkably progressive step of letting eye-witness representatives from both sides of the conflict speak for themselves. In the twentieth century, they were joined by Louis-Arthur Prud'homme and Auguste-Henri de Trémaudan, who preserved the memory of alternative perspectives on Seven Oaks in the French language.

Yet the amateur historical writings were virtually without impact on the post-Confederation historiography of the battle. In the hundred years between 1870 and 1970,

93. Daniel Francis, *Battle for the West* (Edmonton, 1982), 121.

94. Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto, 1984), 78-79.

95. George Woodcock, *The Hudson's Bay Company* (Toronto, 1970), 115-16; Newman, *Caesars of the Wilderness*, 173-75.

96. Alfred Silver, *Red River Story* (New York, 1988), 382-84.

97. For a discussion of the character of Canadian popular history writing, and of the approach of Peter C. Newman in particular, see Lyle Dick, "Renegade in Archives: Peter C. Newman and the Writing of Canadian Popular History," *Archivaria* 22 (Summer 1986): 168-81.

writing on Seven Oaks was dominated by professionals who proceeded to rewrite its history to reflect the ideological imperatives of their ethnic group, the newly dominant Anglo-Canadians on the prairies. With the passage of time, the new tradition of writing became entrenched as "truth," while the more pluralistic Red River amateur accounts passed into oblivion. The problem was that the academics' forms of writing often owed more to the structures of the fictional genre than to scientific analysis, while their contents were based less on empirical research than on discursive tradition.

The Anglo-Canadian discourse on Seven Oaks might be best understood by referring to the concept of master narrative, an overriding interpretive paradigm informing an entire body of writing. After 1870, the master narrative of progress was apparent in the Anglo-Canadian erasure of Métis traditions and the rewriting of the historiography of the battle, as attested to by the works of Bryce, Martin, and a host of other historians and novelists. In these works, the year 1870 simultaneously heralded the end of a long period of stagnation for Red River, its rescue through Canada's acquisition of the region, and the introduction of an integrated national market economy. As a society of newcomers, however, prairie Anglo-Canadians needed to establish cultural traditions to justify their assumption of dominance in the region. A key element in their programme consisted of the Canadians' adoption of the Selkirk settlers as imagined ancestors in the West. Whatever shortcomings they might have perceived in them, these Scots were the only full-blooded European, anglophone settlers from the early-nineteenth century available for the purpose. Selkirk's claims to the occupation of Western lands therefore needed to be valorized, and rivals discredited. The narrativisation of Seven Oaks as a flashpoint in the imagined struggle of civilisation versus savagery was essential to promoting the legitimacy of these adopted ancestors.

In the context of the new master narrative of progress, however, it was important that the Métis assume broader allegorical roles. This was so because the Anglo-Canadians were essentially in competition with the Métis for lands to which this Western Native group had a prior claim, a fact which the resistances of 1869-70 and 1885 had made all too clear. The Métis needed to be seen as violent, volatile, easily led astray, and lacking in judgement — in short, as the antithesis of qualities considered essential to the development of a stable free market economy in the West. Seven Oaks provided a convenient vehicle for the presentation of an alleged Métis weakness of character, implicitly justifying the dispossession of their lands. The preoccupation with this event probably also had as much to do with the construction of Euro-Canadian identities in the West as with the discrediting of the Métis. The representation of a savage Métis "Other" was integral to the inculcation of a kind of "morality tale" in which the chain of stereotyped characteristics of the Métis functioned to set off all the attributes valued by the new capitalist order in the West.

The discourse on Seven Oaks also raises some questions regarding the master narrative of the Canadian historical profession, that the professionalisation of the discipline around 1900 enabled critical methods to supersede the partisanship of nineteenth-century amateurs. With specific reference to Western Canada, the intellectual historian Doug Owram has correctly identified Bryce with a major historiographical shift, focusing on the rehabilitation of the role of the Selkirk settlers. Yet this shift was not rooted in "a

sense of alienation from the East''⁹⁸ so much as it reflected the demonstrable need of an immigrant group aspiring to preeminence in the West to establish a blood line of succession. This study of Seven Oaks also challenges Owram's conclusion that the "major proponents of this increasingly romantic view of life in Red River were those older settlers who had actually experienced life in the settlement before 1870 and their descendants,"⁹⁹ as opposed to Bryce and his successors. The historiography of Seven Oaks suggests that it was actually the other way around. The romance form was essential to the Anglo-Canadians' construction of a history favourable to their claims to dominance, and survivors of Old Red River acquired a romantic sensibility from newcomers such as Bryce, rather than *vice versa*. A case in point was Roderick G. MacBeth, an amateur historian and descendant of Selkirk settlers, whose life spans the transition from the Red River colony to the Canadian period after 1870. An indication of the shift in his own writing is provided by the titles of two of his books, *The Selkirk Settlers in Real Life*, published in 1897, and *The Romance of Western Canada*, published some twenty years later. The titles are also indicative of their contents; on Seven Oaks, MacBeth moves from a neutral, more realistic treatment in the earlier book to a romantic representation of a massacre, based on Bryce, in the second.¹⁰⁰

What we witness in most of the Anglo-Canadian versions, then, is less a reconstruction of the Seven Oaks incident than the construction, through historical discourse, of the self-image of prairie Anglo-Canadian society. Bryce and his successors brought about the transformation of Seven Oaks historiography from Red River pluralism to Anglo-Canadian romance, while Morton presided over its final elevation to the realm of myth. As current writing on the event suggests, when the weight of discourse compresses its sedimentary layers into an ideological bedrock, such myths have been stubbornly resistant to revision.

98. Douglas Owram, *Promise of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900* (Toronto, 1980), 203.

99. *Ibid.*, 208.

100. R. G. MacBeth, *The Selkirk Settlers in Real Life* (Toronto, 1897), 26 and *idem.*, *The Romance of Western Canada* (Toronto, 1918), 42-43.