

Culture



Grant MacEWAN, *Metis Makers of History*, Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books, 1981. 171 pp., \$12.95 (paper)

Samuel W. Corrigan

Volume 2, Number 3, 1982

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078127ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078127ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie

ISSN

0229-009X (print)

2563-710X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Corrigan, S. (1982). Review of [Grant MacEWAN, *Metis Makers of History*, Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books, 1981. 171 pp., \$12.95 (paper)]. *Culture*, 2(3), 156–157. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078127ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASCA), formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne d'Ethnologie, 1982

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

her preference to send her children to integrated schools (so that the prejudice there might appropriately prepare them for adult life). Her narration also touches on her boy friend working as a farm labourer and construction worker, her cousin's involvement in a street fight, and the changes occurring on reserves, where some children were mistreated, some were discouraged to speak Cree by the elders, while others departed for the cities.

Joylessness pervades in all similar histories. The humour and human warmth that exist among the Indians, the Crees in particular, are missing from the author's perceptions. This is rather unfortunate and misleading as well as proof that the informants consistently regarded the author as an outsider. A book focusing on specific individuals has great potential as a medium for expressing not only the difficulties but also the humour of life even in a hostile urban environment.

On more general social issues, Krotz finds the school system to be impersonal, treating children simply on the basis of age and aptitude. The schools have failed to find proper ways to cope with migrants. Psychologists have been employed; breakfast programs and pre-school orientations have been set up. Still children continued to drop out of school, for they generally find urban schools unsatisfactory, discriminatory and irrelevant. Realistic as it is, this scenario has been more fully portrayed and analyzed elsewhere.

Krotz regards the high rate of Indian unemployment as shocking and pitiable. According to him, when they are employed in cities, they are essentially confined to a few places including native organizations, social services, stenographers in Indian Affairs, and administrative posts, as well as to short-term casual work. The author sees job training for Indians as inadequate and unrealistic. He justifiably brands government job-creating programs as "ill-conceived, short term and cynically non-productive" (p. 104).

He regards social services as "shamelessly unrepentant" (p. 148) mechanisms designed to maintain the status quo. Present social services are viewed as too fragmentary to be effective. He advocates that social services should continue but should not create unnecessary dependency among Indians.

Throughout the book in each unit are invariably included casual descriptive statements and comments on social issues, which are followed by outlines of individual lives. Documentation is basically inadequate and there is hardly any sociological analysis of the social issues involved. Moreover, there are many hit-and-run statements. For

example, when Krotz refers to current commercial fishing in God's Lake Narrows, he observes that there is "none in summer because it would take business away from the three lodges which cater to American tourists" (p. 14). There is no further elaboration. By whose authority or power was commercial fishing stopped — the fishing lodges, the band council, the provincial government, or the Federal Government? His statement, as it stands, leaves the reader confused and uninformed. Only a reader with prior knowledge of the God's Lake Narrows may be able to point out that there is indeed a provincial governmental policy which favors sport fishing over commercial fishing in the area, and therefore commercial fishing stops because of provincial governmental regulations.

This book is not suitable for use as a text. Social theories are systematically avoided and a bibliography thoughtfully omitted. The language is highly colloquial, not exactly a good model in academic settings. However, community library should find Krotz a welcome addition to the already existing titles on urban Indians. The Indian viewpoint as presented by a sympathetic reporter and the eye-catching photographs should be of casual interest to the public at large.

Grant MacEWAN, *Metis Makers of History*, Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books, 1981. 171 pp., \$12.95 (paper).

By Samuel W. Corrigan
Brandon University

Cuthbert Grant, Alexander Isbister, Gabriel Dumont, Pauline Johnson — all are names vaguely familiar to most Canadians, yet few people could say exactly who they are or what they did. At a time when native claims are attracting national public attention there is clearly some need to familiarize as many as possible with the very long struggle for dignity and basic freedom which Native people have waged. This is particularly true of Métis, of whom the public knowledge seems to be limited to the names Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont and the loaded term "rebellion". Thus one can welcome any volume which fairly outlines the struggles and achievements of some two dozen Métis of note over the past 175 years.

This book is intended for a wide audience, apparently that very large group of Canadians who are neither historians nor Natives but who have a strong and often romantic interest in the history of

Western Canada. A great many books are written for this particular body of readers in the genre which has been called "popular history". Typically these volumes are reasonably well researched and are prepared in an easy-to-read manner, written in simple style without extensive footnotes or bibliography. Their commendable job is to acquaint the average literate reader with the basic facts without burdening one with a welter of detail or academic trivia. This book is no exception.

The author presents brief biographies of some of the more notable Métis figures, most from the 19th century. A number are individuals referred to briefly in other popular histories—Bostonnai Pangman or Jerry Potts, for example—while some have been the subject of major bibliographies, such as Riel, Cuthbert Grant and Pauline Johnson. Many are fairly recognizable to Canadians as early figures in the history of the West, but are not generally recognized as Métis, an effect of their Scottish names. Their many achievements and their positions in Canadian and British society are all too often not adequately known to Canadians. It is encouraging to see brief, highly readable outlines of their lives in a book intended for a wide audience.

Several questions arise however from the author's approach to his subject. The very selection of these figures is apparently racial, rather than cultural or legal. There are, of course, the conventional names whom one would expect to find in any compendium of western Métis leaders, such as Riel and Dumont. But there are also status Indians including the Six Nations poetess Pauline Johnson and the Alberta Cree and Saddle Lake Band Chief Ralph Steinhauer. And, although Alexander Isbister was certainly a noted Red River Métis, he did spend most of his life in Britain, albeit as something of a Métis spokesman. The only common feature of all these representatives of the Métis is the singular fact of a non-Native ancestor somewhere in their genealogy. Admittedly a critical feature of the many Métis claims in Canada at the moment is simply that Métis are descendents of both Native people and non-Native people, and that entitlements are based upon that particular ancestry. But at the same time Métis are struggling with some success to demonstrate a cultural viability—at least for the 19th century Red River Métis and the 20th century Mackenzie Métis. Much of the argument rationalizing the Métis claim as a people with special needs is based upon elements of cultural viability which led to cultural, and hence economic and political neglect. It seems a great pity in this era to use race rather than identity as a sole criterion for labelling people as Métis. This is particularly so in the case of

the status Indians included here. Many people confuse identity and race, so that even if people such as Pauline Johnson and Ralph Steinhauer have worked hard for the benefit of all Native people—indeed all Canadians—the labelling of such distinguished status Indians as Métis at a time when Métis are struggling to separate their public identity from that of Indians is unfortunate to say the least. A more appropriate approach might have been to speak of Native, rather than Métis, makers of history. One is also forced to presume that the particular selection of individuals, a responsibility and a privilege solely of the author and not open to criticism, did not include many people simply because there is no clear evidence of a non-Native ancestor.

Popular history is intended to publicize basic historical events and figures, and not to argue fine points of interpretation. There is thus no point in dealing with the details of the more important trends and developments of Métis and Canadian political and economic life of the 19th century as they are presented. More definitive studies are readily available, such as those of Van Kirk and Brown, and can be consulted by anyone seeking a finer description and analysis of Métis life and history. This book may seem to gloss over many events and leave an impression of hasty surface treatment of people, but that is the nature and perhaps the necessity of the beast. It speaks highly of the author that a popular history intended to inform a wide audience of laymen still includes footnotes and references.

One final comment is in order. A light and breezy style may well help to inform, but the replication of so many hoary old racist stereotypes through the use of a glib vocabulary mars the book dreadfully. The Métis, for example, saw a "challenge to their wild freedom" (p. 10), and found "civilization" mysterious (p. 13). Ralph Steinhauer, although a status Indian and a Band Chief, is Métis because of the "immutable laws of biology" (p. 154) while Pauline Johnson demonstrated "the courage of her race" (p. 151), whichever that might be. These are means of expression; they are not intended to cast slurs or do harm. The author's reputation as a fair and honest man who has long recognized the contributions of Native people in Canada does him great justice. How in the world, then, can an editor of such a writer in this day and age allow such a sentence as appears on page one of the book :

"After all, having a paleface son-in-law could enhance the tribal prestige of the lady's family."