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Braz, Albert. *The False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. Pp.xi + 245; illus. CDN\$55.00 (cloth). ISBN: 0-8020-4760-2.

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In the Fall of 2002, I received a research grant to investigate an unpublished manuscript that I had discovered in the collections of the North Dakota State Historical Association Archives in Bismarck. The document, entitled "The Buffalo Hunters of the Pembinah" was purported to be a copy of an unpublished journal of an English nobleman as he travelled with a group of Métis hunters following the buffalo herds westward into Montana. Normally, such a narrative would be interesting but not particularly unusual, as several European sportsmen were hunting in the West during the nineteenth century. However, not all of these adventurers had fugitive servants fleeing Red River after 1869.

The original owner and editor of the manuscript was a gentleman, a local civic booster and founder of Fargo, North Dakota, named Gordon Keeney, who claimed to have found the hand-written diary during a trip to the Pembina region in 1872. His intention was to duplicate, annotate, and publish the journal as an adventure book for boys, a project he eventually abandoned. Eventually, the partially-completed work found its way into the North Dakota Archives, where I encountered it in the late 1980s.

What does all of this have to do with Louis Riel?

When I was interviewed by the *Calgary Herald* regarding my research project, I mentioned in passing that the English nobleman had a mysterious Métis servant who played chess, wrote letters, and was traveling under an assumed name. I also noted that the pioneer editor, Gordon Keeney, believed that the servant was Louis Riel, on the run from the Canadian authorities after the 1869-70 Red River Resistance.

The response to the possibility that newly-discovered historical information on Louis Riel might have been uncovered initiated an avalanche of publicity after the *Calgary Herald* article, which appeared on the front page of the newspaper on 22 November, 2002, and was picked up by the wire services shortly thereafter.¹ The publicity surrounding a seemingly-innocuous description of a research project soon

¹ After the *Calgary Herald* article appeared, the story was picked up by the Canadian Press and Reuters and reprinted across Canada. Examples of the coverage include: "Diary Linked to Louis Riel," *Calgary Herald* (22 November 2002; cover story and photo: A1, 19); "Diary May Unlock Mystery of Louis Riel's Life in Exile," *Edmonton Journal* (22 November 2002, A10); "Diary May Explain Rebel's Time in U.S.," *Regina Leader Post* (23 November 2002, D14); "Diary Could Provide Story of Riel's U.S. Years," *Globe & Mail* (23 November 2002, A21D); "Diary May Finally Reveal Riel's 'Lost Years'," *Winnipeg Free Press* (23 November 2002; cover story: A1, A4); and "Mysterious Diary Could Shed Light on Riel in U.S.," *Victoria Times-Colonist* (25 November 2002, B4). A series of radio and television interviews followed, culminating in an appearance on CBC's *The National* in January of 2003.

escalated into national event, making the discovery of the diary a *cause célèbre* among academics, pundits, and ordinary citizens across Canada and the United States. The immediate, and often passionate, response by other scholars and members of the public ranged from outright hostility “The manuscript is a fake!” – to phone calls and letters of support, to spiritual advice, and to movie proposals. The unwanted and unexpected notoriety generated by the media circus follows me to this very day.

The many reasons why the topic of Louis Riel generates such violent emotional responses (in people who ought to know better) is the subject of Albert Braz’s book, *The False Traitor*. In his Introduction to the book, Braz describes Riel as “simultaneously one of the most popular and most elusive figures in Canadian literature and culture in general,” noting that since his death in 1885, Riel has been depicted in various ways: as “a traitor to Confederation, a French-Canadian and Catholic martyr, a bloodthirsty rebel, a New World liberator, a pawn of shadowy white forces, a Prairie political maverick, an Aboriginal hero, a deluded mystic, an alienated intellectual, a victim of Western Canadian progress, and even a Father of Confederation” (3).

In studying this wide-ranging and contradictory range of roles, Braz concludes that the reason that Riel’s image has changed so markedly over time is due to the fact that portrayals of the man have less to do with Riel himself than about the authors of these portraits, their social realities, and their particular artistic and political agendas. He also notes that the “Riel discourse” is largely Euro-Canadian in origin and context, and that the writings of Riel himself are largely absent. Finally, he observes that although Canadian intellectuals have portrayed Riel as quintessentially “Canadian,” Riel considered himself to be, first and foremost, a Métis.

The remainder of the book is Braz’s critique of the abundant writing germane to Riel’s political, spiritual, mental, and iconic role in the Canadian cultural landscape. Chapter One, “The Red River Patriot: Riel in his Biographical and Social Context,” argues that Riel’s perception of the Métis as a national and ethnic entity evolved to accommodate his changing perception of his personal identity over time. Chapter Two, “Riel As an Enemy of Confederation,” examines the largely Anglo-Canadian body of writing that excoriates Riel as a Canadian traitor, yet does not truly accept him as a citizen on par with other Canadians.

Chapter Three, “The Martyr (I): Riel as an Ethnic and Religious Victim of Confederation,” examines the body of work from Quebec-based scholars of the late nineteenth century, who essentially viewed English Canada’s dealings with Louis Riel as epitomizing Anglophone bigotry towards all French-speaking, Roman Catholic people. Louis Riel himself is not the true focus of these writings; he is merely a straw man, a convenient vehicle for expressing Quebec discontent.

Chapter Four, “The Go-Between: Riel as Cultural Mediator,” reflects the collective desire of Canadian intellectuals to forge some kind of national character out of the multiplicity of postwar ethnocultural identities in Canada. Recognizing that incorporating aboriginality is key to this process, reflections upon Louis Riel in fiction, poetry, and theatre are embraced as a comfortable mechanism for including indigenous people into the cultural fabric, if only at arms-length.

Chapter Five, “The Martyr (II): Riel as a Socio-Political Victim of Confederation,” charts the further development of the Riel *persona* in fiction, theatre, television, and literary criticism. In these creations, the historical facts are manipulated, even distorted, to achieve the artistic and political goals of their creators. It could be argued that the various docu-dramatic treatments of Riel over the years helped to create the monster that is CBC historical drama, that reached the nadir of its development in the recent docu-drama *Prairie Giant: The Tommy Douglas Story*, that was pulled from distribution shortly after its release. The complaints with *Prairie Giant* echo those that emanate from the various fictionalized portrayals of the Riel story: the character portrayals are too black-and-white; elements of the story are fictions that are not supported by historical fact; and the plot is used to explore themes of nationalism, environmental

degradation, capitalism, and a host of other issues having little to do with the actual biography of the central character.

Chapter Six, "The Mystic/Madman: Riel as a Para-Rational Individual," focuses on the debate over Louis Riel's mental state. Historians have long focused on the insanity debate because of Riel's execution for treason in 1885. Had Riel been recognized by the court as mentally unbalanced, he might have avoided the noose by reason of insanity. However, as we all know, Riel's passionate courtroom defense of his own reason, and of the collective rights of Métis people, sealed his fate. The current writings focus on Riel's unorthodox spiritual beliefs and political goals in light of his mental instability, and how Riel's fate has influenced the public's political perceptions today. Is he more valuable to mainstream Canadian society as a dangerous sociopath, or as a harmless kook who got in over his head? Was he a threat to Christianity, or is he an unrecognized saint? Is Riel more valuable to the Métis cause as a freedom-fighter who sacrificed his life for Métis rights, or as a spiritual figure wrongfully executed for treason? The debate becomes less about Riel's insanity or guilt, and more about the validity of aboriginal rights, and Métis political rights in particular.

Métis activists have long recognized that public portrayals of the Riel trial can be used for a host of different purposes, including the collective expiation of residual Canadian guilt over the conditions facing indigenous people. The CBC's retrying of Louis Riel on national television in the fall of 2002, with famed litigator Clayton Ruby as Riel's lawyer, resulted, predictably enough, in a pardon. A CBC/Dominion Institute Internet poll of 10,000 viewers came back with 87 per cent pro-pardon, a feel-good conclusion if ever there was one. Was the "warm-fuzzy" television trial intended to teach Canadians about the events leading to Riel's death, or was it intended to let Canadians off the hook? The debate among Métis politicians, as archived in the Métis National Council press releases of 2002, reflects the widely-felt sense of apprehension over the possible interpretations of the televised event, and its political implications.²

Braz's concluding chapter, "Riel: A Canadian Patriot in Spite of Himself," views the recent postmodern interpretations of Riel as the essential Canadian as being fundamentally dishonest, noting that Riel "can only be transformed into a Canadian patriot only if one denies his own story, his specificity, and his alterity" (204).

One cannot fault Braz's identification of principle themes or his critique, based, as they are, on an astonishingly broad spectrum of material focused on Louis Riel in English and in French, ranging from the very prominent popular histories, to rather obscure poems and novels. Having said that, one must take issue with one element of Braz's literature review, that being his choice of historiographical treatments on Riel. Here, I am not referring to the literary fiction or media portrayals, but the secondary historical works generated on Riel. As a historian who is familiar with both the scholarship and the principal academic controversies concerning Riel and the Métis, Braz's bibliography has some gaping holes that verge on errors of omission. In fact, it often appears to this reader as if Braz had been supplied with a select bibliography of Riel historiography provided by a colleague having what Van Toorn might describe as having his "own rhetorical and polemical purposes" (178). Most of the historical scholarship featured here is dated and decidedly status-quo; indeed, few contemporary Métis scholars would rely solely on George Stanley or Donald Creighton for their information on Riel's life, but supplement their views with the work of several other writers working during the same period and beyond. I would also have included some of the recent revisionist critiques of the historiography; Kenneth Dewar's "Where to

² See Métis National Council, "Media," at <http://www.metisnation.ca/press/2002.html>.

Begin and How: Narrative Openings in Donald Creighton's Historiography" is a case in point, as is my own work on the writing of Joseph Kinsey Howard.³

Having made this rather minor criticism, I would also argue that *The False Traitor* should be recommended reading for any scholar wanting to understand the complex interplay of literature and other forms of mass media in creating public perceptions of historical figures and events.

³ Kenneth Dewar, "Where to Begin and How: Narrative Openings in Donald Creighton's Historiography," in *The Contested Past: Reading Canada's History: Selections from the Canadian Historical Review*, ed. Marlene Shore (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 328-331; Heather Devine, "History as Art: Joseph Kinsey Howard and the Writing of *Strange Empire*" (paper presented at A.B. Guthrie's *The Big Sky — After Fifty Years*, Center for the Rocky Mountain West, The University of Montana, Missoula, 11-14 September 1997).