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Book Review: The False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Culture

Jill St. Germain

University of Calgary

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In The False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Culture, Albert Braz examines treatments of the mercurial nineteenth-century Métis leader in an astonishing array of plays, poems, novels, television dramas, Hollywood films, and sculpture. His study spans the century and more since Riel emerged at the head of the Métis resistance at Red River, Manitoba, in 1869-70 and was executed in 1885 as a traitor to Canada for his role in fomenting rebellion on the Saskatchewan.

Braz’s study reveals a myriad of characterizations of Riel, some based on the historical record, many of them figments of an author’s colorful and sometimes lurid imagination. Though significant from historical and cultural perspectives, few of them proved of enduring artistic merit. These include manifestations of Riel as “a sage and a madman; a Catholic mystic and an Anabaptist visionary; an Aboriginal leader and a puppet of white forces; a cultural mediator and a promoter of racial warfare; a Prairie maverick and a pan-Canadian patriot.” Such diversity persists, Braz notes, despite Louis Riel’s own extensive introspective writings in which he associated himself firmly with the Métis community. The most intriguing of these discrepancies for Braz is Riel’s transformation in English Canadian culture from the villain of 1885 to hero of the alienated West, spiritual father of Canadian multiculturalism, and, even more astounding, Father of Confederation.

Braz explains this conundrum with the argument that cultural portraits of Riel more accurately reflect the authors of the various pieces than the subject they depict. Thus Riel has come to serve a largely symbolic and often unrecognizable role in the popular iconography of the country which, as a representative of the Métis nation, he held in deep suspicion.
Braz has done an excellent job of unearthing cultural representations of Riel in a variety of media and establishing them in their literary or artistic context. He is less successful in connecting these works explicitly to his central argument: that they reflect their creators more than their subject. More often than not he leaves us in the dark about the contemporary influences that brought the creators to depict Riel alternately as villain, hero, mediator, martyr, and madman. This may result from the fact that while his grasp of cultural sources is apparent, his command of historical literature is less evident.

The False Traitor offers an original and persuasive perspective on the much studied but still elusive figure of Louis Riel, shedding light on the obstructions that continue to obscure the Métis hero’s identity.

JILL ST. GERMAIN
Department of History
University of Calgary