

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 1985

Review of *Riel and the Rebellion 1885 Reconsidered* By Thomas Flanagan

John E. Foster
University of Alberta

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Foster, John E., "Review of *Riel and the Rebellion 1885 Reconsidered* By Thomas Flanagan" (1985). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1835.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1835>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BOOK REVIEWS

Riel and the Rebellion 1885 Reconsidered. By Thomas Flanagan. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1983. Maps, photographs, figures, notes, index. ix + 177 pp.

Professor Flanagan's latest revisionist publication heralds the centenary of the 1885 Saskatchewan Rebellion with a series of developmentally related essays, expressed as chapters, that challenge the conventional wisdom as to the factors responsible for one Plains Métis community, under Louis Riel, taking up arms to redress their grievances. At the same time Flanagan fails to address one longstanding deficiency in the literature.

Flanagan's scholarly strengths lie in his analyses of political issues and processes. His

two chapters on the land issues in relation to the Rebellion are without equal. His discussion of aboriginal title is of interest in its own right but, more important, it serves as a vehicle to define and to explain Louis Riel's role and contribution in the Rebellion. His brief introductory chapter leaves him open to accusations that he has selected his issues to reflect his revisionist views. Yet the chapter constitutes one of the most useful introductions to the subject. At times, however, the author's choice of descriptive terms and phrases suggests the instincts of a polemicist, as does his last chapter on the current issue of a posthumous pardon for Riel. Nevertheless his examination of Riel's motives, expressed in the chapters on the Métis leader's pursuit of a personal indemnity and on his trial, reflect a penetrating and objective, if unsympathetic, analysis.

In his analysis of the issues that he has selected for discussion Flanagan successfully challenges the interpretive drift of the last half century, which has witnessed increasingly shrill though frequently uncritical condemnations of Canadian government culpability and equally uncritical identification with the "victimization" of the "innocent" Métis. Rather than concluding discussion, however, Flanagan's book should encourage further research and analysis.

The absence of an understanding of the sociocultural ways of the Plains Métis remains a cardinal deficiency in the literature examining the factors responsible for the Rebellion. The bias of Canadian historians, which has seen the events surrounding the colony of Canada's acquisition and increasing control of British North West America as the key historical perspective, has resulted in little scholarly attention being devoted to the history and sociocultural evolution of the Métis. As a result the "primitiveness" and "ignorance" of the Plains Métis rather than their cultural values and attitudes have predominated as factors of explanation. Flanagan does much to dispel the image of naivete associated with Métis behavior. On occasion he demonstrates

a sense that Riel and the Métis marched to a different cultural drummer. Yet in the final analysis Flanagan does not emphasize the necessity of understanding the Métis views of their experience as it relates to their sense of themselves as an enduring corporate entity. Flanagan does not appear to view the absence of an understanding of Métis ways in the literature as a critical weakness in evaluating the factors responsible for the Rebellion.

As a revisionist work Flanagan's book makes a significant scholarly contribution to the study of the Saskatchewan Rebellion. In its failure to take cognizance of one of the principal lacunas in the literature it underlines the necessity of addressing this problem in order to understand all the factors responsible for the Rebellion.

JOHN E. FOSTER
Department of History
University of Alberta