

Gerald Friesen, *The Honourable John Norquay: Indigenous Premier, Canadian Statesman*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2024. 619 pages. ISBN 978-1-77284-058-2. \$39.95 hardcover.

Gerald Friesen's compelling book is not just a biography of Manitoba's first Indigenous premier but also a meditation on the vagaries of political fame, and who gets to be remembered by future generations and who does not. *The Honourable John Norquay: Indigenous Premier, Canadian Statesman* is both lucidly written and learned. It includes several maps, the subject's family tree and those of his mother and his wife, and a wide assortment of photographs and political cartoons. It is also prodigiously documented, with 120 pages of endnotes. Yet hovering over this life of Norquay is the shadow of another Indigenous leader, Louis Riel—a situation that Friesen further complicates by generally describing both men as Métis. Even though he is attempting to reclaim Norquay as a major historical figure, Friesen seems unable to position Norquay except in relation to Riel. Tellingly, the publication of his book coincided with Premier Wab Kinew's official recognition of Riel as Manitoba's honorary first premier, with the nominal premier once again eclipsing the actual one.

John Norquay (1841-1889) was born in the Red River Settlement parish of St. Andrews, approximately 30 km north of present-day Winnipeg. Of mixed Cree and Scottish (Orkney) ancestry, and with deep roots in the fur trade, he grew up on the family farm. Despite his father's untimely death when Norquay was only eight years old, he was able to acquire an exceptional education, thanks in no little measure to the support of leading Red River Anglican clergy such as Bishop David Anderson. Among other professions, Norquay was a farmer, teacher, and politician. The last is unquestionably the most important. He was first elected to Manitoba's Legislative Assembly in 1871 and would join the cabinet within a year. He became premier in 1878 and would govern the province for the next nine years, a period of explosive demographic and economic growth during which Manitoba's "settler population multiplied more than tenfold and the economy grew proportionately" (p. 432), upending the sociocultural dynamics that had characterized the Red River Settlement.

Friesen, is a prominent scholar of Canadian history in general and of the Prairie West in particular, details Norquay's private life, including his not overly successful speculative financial ventures. He excels in his depiction of Norquay's relentless efforts to gain rights over public lands and natural resources for Manitoba, a campaign that was sometimes encumbered by his complex relationship with Canada's first prime minister, John A. Macdonald. Friesen's main thesis is that Norquay embodied a third way of doing politics, between the polarizing visions of Ontario-born Orangemen and Riel's Métis. In both his political and private life, Friesen writes, "Norquay chose the path of negotiation and compromise . . . He rejected what he regarded as Louis Riel's extreme path, instead working within the economic and political constraints imposed on their homeland by big money and big government. Living through the phases of the west's transition from Indigenous to Canadian sovereignty, he managed to maintain his perch atop Manitoba politics while adjusting to a new nation-state and global capital movements" (p. 3). As he elaborates, "It is clear that Norquay was not a rebel" (p. 28), being the epitome of moderation.

It is hard not to detect a certain defensiveness in Friesen's portrait of Norquay, a tension that points to a possible conflict between the two adjectives of his subtitle: "Indigenous" premier and "Canadian" statesman. As Friesen asks of Norquay at the outset, "Was he merely a collaborator, a quisling?" (p. 3). But Friesen's defensiveness may also reflect his uncertainty about Norquay's collective identity, as well as envy of Riel's factional Métis nationalism. When

Manitoba joined the Canadian Confederation on July 1, 1870, it was demographically dominated by two communities of mixed First Nations and European ancestry, the predominantly Catholic Michif/Métis (Riel's people) and the mainly Protestant Bungee/English (Norquay's people). Friesen invariably refers to Riel as a Métis. But he is much less uniform when it comes to Norquay, whom he describes variously as “the leading political representative of about one-third of the provincial population, the ‘English,’ Rupert’s Land-born portion” (p. 1); a leader of the “‘Halfbreed’ . . . community” (p. 75); “a representative of old Red River” (p. 88); and a member of the province’s “majority Métis community” (p. 1), or “the so-called Métis premier” (p. 3). Even as one reaches the end of the book, the ethnosocial collectivity to which Norquay belonged is not at all self-evident.

Friesen’s identification of Norquay as Métis is curious, since he repeatedly shows Norquay as having few affinities with the “traditional” Métis (and Francophones in general), as opposed to the diverse English-speaking and Protestant communities. Norquay’s attitude is not surprising given that, as Friesen notes, “the Riel vision of the Métis nation offered little room in its ranks for Bungee/English-speaking Protestants or for a single, multilingual ‘Halfbreed’/Métis community. Norquay never endorsed Riel’s vision” (p. 75). This suggests that the population of mixed First Nations and European ancestry in the early days of the province of Manitoba did not comprise one community but two, being largely divided along linguistic and religious lines. It is certainly noteworthy that Norquay was (conveniently?) absent from the heart of the Red River Settlement when Riel led the Métis resistance to Canada’s acquisition of the territory from the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1869-1870. No less significant, when Riel clashed for the second time with Canada in 1885, in what is now Saskatchewan, two of Norquay’s sons joined the fight, not alongside the Métis, but as part of the Canadian expeditionary force. They evidently had the support of their father, who deemed Riel’s actions as not just misguided but “insane,” hoping that “the Rebels will be knocked to h—l” (p. 288). Incidentally, Friesen makes the provocative contention that if Riel had not engaged in the military conflict in 1885, which “permitted Ottawa to rally all the provinces, the breakup of Canada and the annexation of portions of its territory to the United States could well have taken place” (p. 222). That is, Riel saved Canada by declaring war on it.

Like other contemporary scholars, and Franco-Métis intellectuals, Friesen appears to find the term “Half-breed” anathema—in contrast to some descendants of the group, such as Gregg Dahl, who rejoice in it. But there are risks in conflating two communities that historically were so profoundly affected by dissimilar languages and religions, as their political actions during the Red River Resistance illustrate. Friesen reveals some ambivalence about his choice of collective identity for his subject when he asks: “How would Norquay respond to today’s observers who choose to designate him as ‘Métis’?” (p. 436). He further troubles his selection of nomenclature by acknowledging that “[s]ome of the Norquay family descendants to whom I spoke say they are of mixed ancestry and choose to be recognized as Indigenous but not Métis” (p. 569). However, he does not disclose what is the specific collective identity that they embrace.

At the beginning of his book, Friesen laments that, like almost all other politicians of his time, Norquay “has been forgotten by present-day citizens” (p. 2). Part of the explanation for this societal oblivion must have to do with the metamorphosis of Riel from an enemy of Canada into a Canadian patriot, which inevitably problematizes the contributions of his antagonists, whether Indigenous or not. In any case, it has been said that Canada has never had enough space for both Macdonald and Riel. Perhaps for the same reasons, Manitoba (and Canada) has never had enough space for both Riel and Norquay. But it is difficult to imagine how identifying Norquay as Métis is going to enable his recovery, so long as people continue to associate the name Métis with Riel.

To cite the subtitle of Jean Teillet's 2019 book *The North-West Is Our Mother*, it is a history of *Louis Riel's People, the Métis Nation*.

Albert Braz
Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature and English
University of Alberta