

## Chester Brown

*Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*. Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2006, 260 p.

Chester Brown's *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* is a self-reflexive portrayal of the subtle human relations that create legal and historical events—in this case, a narrative of the Red River Rebellion and the Métis resistance to Canadian incursion on their territory, with an emphasis on how these events were informed by Louis Riel's political and personal life. In Brown's hands, the comic strip becomes an ideal medium for conveying the story of the historically marginalized character of Louis Riel. The black-and-white publication draws the reader's attention to the shades of grey that are silenced in historical accounts and contemporary retellings.

Brown draws artistic inspiration from the visual style of Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie* to relate a gripping drama. The result is both story and history: although Brown cites factual information from a range of historical sources (listed in the bibliography), he presents a dramatized version of events for the purpose of storytelling in the comic-book form. By documenting factual details and the creative liberties he has taken in extensive footnotes, he discloses his intertextual and creative process to the reader. In this way, he explicitly acknowledges the subjectivity of interpretation in any representation of this controversial figure.

Brown establishes his pacing by repeating panels, as demonstrated by the court-martial and execution of Thomas Scott, a controversial event that led to Riel's exile from Canada (p. 71). By repeating panels in which little action occurs (e.g., the four almost-still frames of an outhouse on p. 49), Brown allows readers access to the slow pace of events from 1869 to 1885 that led to Riel's execution. The Métis are depicted not as a panicked mob with weapons but, rather, as an organized community pursuing what they saw as a reasonable course of action. Since many readers know how the story ends, Brown's piece is about the journey.

Brown's narration of Riel's journey through the Canadian legal system shows his compelling use of visual imagery in service of larger points. When Riel is taken to trial, the courtroom is denoted by a black background, while the characters in the foreground are drawn in white (pp. 203–32). Riel appears on the left side of the panel, which forces him to face the right, where the judge's desk is located. When Riel repeatedly objects to his counsel's attempt to pursue an insanity plea, his lawyer faces the judge and states, "Mr. Riel should [not] be allowed to say anything" (p. 210). He then adds, "Mr. Riel must be given to understand immediately that he won't be allowed to interfere in the management of this case" (p. 211). Through the combination of visuals and text, readers see how the silence imposed on Riel by his lawyer is echoed in the historical records.

Brown depicts silence in his landscapes of quiet snow (p. 149) and in Riel's silent desperation in his cell (p. 113). This silencing continues to the hangman's

scaffold, where a priest advises Riel to die like Christ, with quiet dignity (p. 237). Riel's death is symbolized by the absence of a comic frame, the only disruption of the border in the consistent six-panel pages (p. 238). In this rendering, the tragic irony of Riel's situation is that in his desperate attempt to be heard, he fell from the hangman's scaffold to the margins of history. By employing the marginal medium of a comic strip to tell this story, Brown cleverly invites readers to reflect on Riel's marginality in his trial and in the story of his life.

How can silence and miscommunication be represented in a graphic novel? To signal the lack of communication between the Métis and the federal government, Brown puts the Métis dialogue in brackets. This meta-textual and visual use of bracketing indicates the linguistic divide more clearly than narrative alone could: it asks us to see that the Métis demands were bracketed off from federal interests, largely incomprehensible to Ottawa, and generally ignored by English-speaking officials. Just as Riel waited for telegrams from Ottawa, or for any type of response or compensation from the federal government, so readers wait for the next panel, which will ultimately lead them to Riel's death.

The marginal form of storytelling that Brown has chosen is a highly suitable medium for retelling the complex tale of Louis Riel. This evocative piece showcases the interplay of law, religion, politics, and social unrest during a period of upheaval in Canadian history. Selected illustrations of maps, creative depictions of characters, and Brown's personal interpretation of events make this text appealing to a wide range of readers, from historians to curious students of politics. Professors in history and Canadian studies have found this text useful at the graduate and undergraduate levels.

The artistic merit of the piece is indisputable; yet its meaning relies on the audience's interpretation. Building on the recent trend in presenting historical biographies in graphic novels, Brown's work is ground-breaking in its effort at self-reflexive transparency. Whether you are fully, vaguely, or not at all aware of the events that led up to Riel's execution, you will profit from Brown's imaginative and open-ended approach to presenting history and from his artistic articulation of events, non-events, geography, and individuals.

Amanda Murphy  
School of Canadian Studies  
Carleton University  
Ottawa, ON Canada

### **Elise Chenier**

*Strangers in Our Midst: Sexual Deviancy in Postwar Ontario*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008, 384 p.

Constructions of, and responses to, sexual deviancy form the subject matter of Elise Chenier's dissertation-turned-monograph, *Strangers in Our Midst: Sexual*