



He wanted to die with Riel

Raised a white Toronto Methodist named Will Jackson, he invented a new life and rich native past

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JIM CHRISTY

HonorÃ© Jaxon:

Prairie Visionary

by Donald B. Smith

Coteau Books,

294 pages, \$24.95

Twenty years ago, I came across a newspaper clipping dated December 1951, a story illustrated by the photograph on the cover of this fascinating biography.

It showed a white-bearded old man with a wide brimmed hat and two-tone, wingtip shoes, sitting on a New York sidewalk surrounded by a wall of boxes and bundles of papers. He had been evicted and the papers were a vast archive of the plains Indians and the MÃ©tis nation. He was called Major Jaxon. I have been haunted by the photograph ever since.

Calgary historian Donald B. Smith had seen the photograph 10 years before I did, and was likewise haunted. Only he did something about it.

HonorÃ© Jaxon is the third biography in what Smith calls his "Prairie Imposters" series. The others are about Grey Owl and Buffalo Child Long Lance. Both previous books focused a sharp light that illuminated the men behind elaborate masks and disguises but neither work can hold a candle to this one.

William Henry Jackson was born in Toronto in 1861 to proper god-fearing parents recently emigrated from England. While the boy was studying the classics at the University of Toronto, his folks and his brother moved to the prairies.

When he traveled to Saskatchewan after graduation, Jackson got a glimpse of his future, and the new past that would replace his old one. Immediately he was caught up in the MÃ©tis resistance. Because he was the most learned person in those parts, Jackson became an interpreter, translator and secretary

â€" and until now, a footnote in Canadian history: "Riel's secretary."

Jackson translated for Riel at the MÃ©tis messiah's trial. We know what happened to Riel. Jackson himself was tried and would probably have also been executed â€" he loudly proclaimed that he wished to share Riel's fate â€" except that his family conspired to have him committed to an insane asylum. It made sense, after all; any white man taking up the MÃ©tis cause had to be crazy.

All this is fascinating stuff but it only takes up a third of the book; the rest of the work is even more interesting.

Jackson escaped the asylum and fled over the border. He lectured throughout the western states and eventually landed in Chicago â€" where he took up the cause of labour rights, studied anarchism and was a supporter of the Haymarket Martyrs. He even translated in court for some of them, as he had done for Riel.

Soon enough he morphed into the personage he had imaged himself to be since his first trip to Saskatchewan. Now he was HonorÃ© Jaxon, son of a Virginian father and a Plains Indian mother, born in the sweetgrass country of Montana in the last days of the buffalo hunt.

But he wasn't a real imposter like Archie Belaney or Sylvester Long. He did little to hide his tracks. He kept in contact with his family, made trips back to Canada, saw old friends. His appeal, and the appeal of Smith's book, is not in Jaxon's subterfuge but in his personality and view of the world.

There was something rigid and selfish in the machinations of Grey Owl and Buffalo Child Long Lance. They were running from something inside themselves toward something they thought they could manufacture outside themselves. Jaxon was driven by a romantic view of the world and a heightened sensitivity to injustice. Ironically, he was the one considered crazy, even by his biographer.

Jaxon was a friend of Frank Lloyd Wright and a colleague of Voltairine de Cleyre. He was an early adherent of the Baha'i faith, but dropped out when it got too organized.

In the Thirties, Jaxon bought lots in the Bronx, on one of which he built a castle out of discarded wooden boxes. At the age of 88, he worked stoking the furnaces of an apartment building before going to tend his newsstand.

He wasn't nuts, merely a dreamer of heroic proportions.

The only fault I can find with this biography is the way the author frequently condescends to or patronizes his subject. In fact, *HonorÃ© Jaxon* is book-ended by this "important point" â€" that "*occasionally those on the fringe may see things more clearly than those in the mainstream.*" (Italics, the author's.)

Occasionally?

It's as if Smith is making a plea to his colleagues in academia to understand

why he has devoted so much time to an old guy such as you might pass on your way to your morning lecture, some bagman spouting Latin tags while waving a bottle in a paper bag.

But Smith wrote it, after all. And Coteau published it " and, what's more, is promoting it, sending the author around Canada and into the States " for which they deserve accolades. We have a history filled with extraordinary characters but very few publishers with the foresight and courage to "risk" bringing out and promoting a book about any of them " as if that's not their job.

Jim Christy is an artist, poet and author of numerous books of fiction and non-fiction.