

Louis Riel Biography Suffers from Its Revisionist Slant

BOOKS

Riel: A Life of Revolution

By Maggie Siggins. HarperCollins, 507 pp, \$29, hardcover.

• By VERNE McDONALD

As a Canadian hero, Louis Riel stands out from an iconography heavy with suits, ties, and visiting explorers from other countries. There are also not many national heroes who were hanged for treason yet did not become the focus of any subsequent political movement, unless you count the 90-year electoral drought the Conservatives suffered in Quebec.

I don't know what history is taught in Ontario, but in high school and

university in Alberta and B.C., Riel was presented to me as the man whose decisiveness and determination in defence of human rights helped found the province of Manitoba, but who ran afoul of central-Canadian politics. In defending the same principles in the 1885 rebellion, he brought on defeat and final failure through his vacillation and lack of a coherent purpose, yet through the perceived threat he posed to Ottawa he did accomplish the wildly unintended feat of causing the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the uniting of the West with the rest of Canada.

Maggie Siggins would have us believe that Riel's vision of the Northwest, with apartheid-style homelands for Métis, Natives, Bavarians, Irish, et cetera, was indeed a coherent one, even if that

vision had him making up new names for the days of the week while British troops and Canadian militia closed in. Siggins is seeking backing for her thesis that Riel was a revolutionary, so she tries not to dwell on the fact that his Métis nation would have resembled medieval Spain more than a populist democracy. She smooths over the contradictions and inconsistencies of Riel's life as much as possible to present a simplistic story of a tragic hero fighting evil enemies.

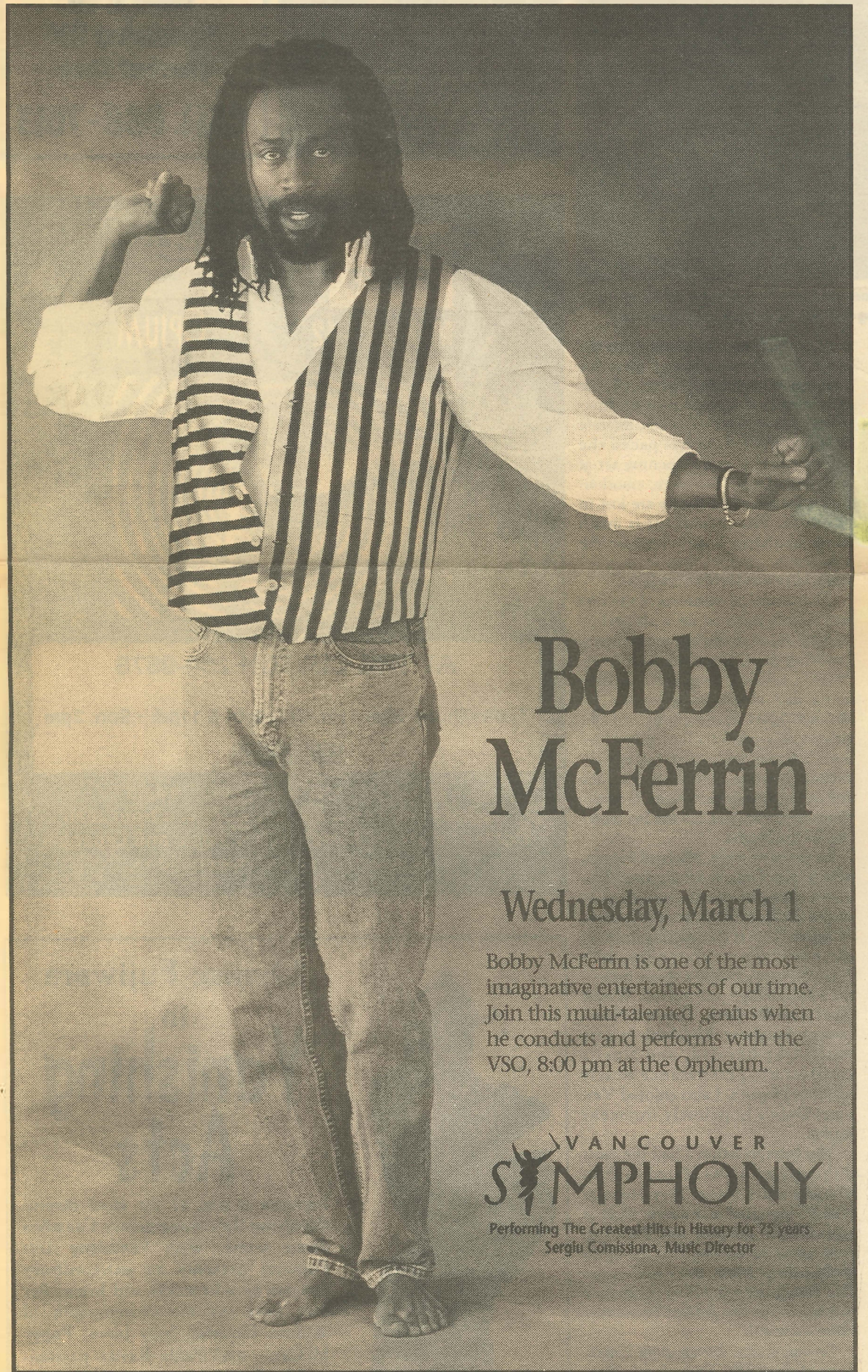
George Bowering, writing in *Quill and Quire*, notes that after almost a century of anti-Riel bias in Canadian historical writing, the past 25 years have seen a wealth of new research and more sympathetic publications. While drawing on these in her meticulously researched biography, Siggins seems to discount

this quarter-century of work with generalizations such as: "Almost every historian over the years has condemned the execution of Thomas Scott [in 1870] as being without any legal foundation, a summary, vicious act." Of several historians I have read, most sympathize with Riel in his problems with Scott, and none unequivocally condemns the execution. It is as though Siggins is trying to stake some sort of claim as the first of Riel's sympathizers.

Always being on Riel's side leads Siggins into some convolutions. She characterizes Hugh Richardson, the judge at Riel's trial, as a patronage pawn who "almost always" sided with the Conservative government, then strangely illustrates her point with a quote from an appeal Richardson wrote in 1880 asking

the government to abandon its policy of neglect and settle Métis claims. Following many negative quotes about Riel or his actions, Siggins hurries to add disclaimers that the statement cited was made years after the fact or the source was ill, or vengeful, or self-serving, and so on. These disclaimers do not seem to be needed for any other statements.

Having the historian's bias out front is better than a hypocritically false objectivity, but phrases such as the summing up of U.S. Indian agent A.R. Keller as a "typical white Indian-hater" prevent *Riel: A Life of Revolution* from being the authoritative book on Riel that it might have been. It sometimes seems less an examination of a 19th-century man than a document of the 1990s. ■



Bobby McFerrin

Wednesday, March 1

Bobby McFerrin is one of the most imaginative entertainers of our time. Join this multi-talented genius when he conducts and performs with the VSO, 8:00 pm at the Orpheum.



Performing The Greatest Hits in History for 75 years
Sergiu Comissiona, Music Director

For tickets, call the Symphony Hotline at 876-3434, or TicketMaster at 280-3311. For Group Discounts, call 684-9100

Concert Sponsor



Media Sponsors



Official Airline



TWELVE MINUTES MAX A Performance Exhibition
February 27 & 28 at 8pm • Firehall Arts Centre • Tickets \$7.50 • For info call 689-0926

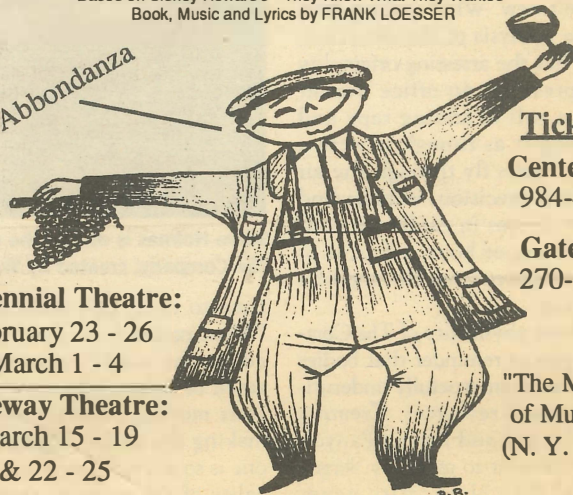
The Greater Vancouver Operatic Society presents

FRANK LOESSER'S MUSICAL

THE MOST HAPPY FELLA

Based on Sidney Howard's "They Knew What They Wanted"
Book, Music and Lyrics by FRANK LOESSER

Abbondanza



Tickets!

Centennial
984-4484

Gateway
270-1812

Centennial Theatre:

February 23 - 26
March 1 - 4

Gateway Theatre:

March 15 - 19
& 22 - 25

"The Musical
of Musicals"
(N. Y. Times)

CKNW/98 SEASPAR WARDEN MUSIC LEXUS RICHMOND TOYOTA

The Most Happy Fella is presented through special arrangement with, and all authorized performance materials are supplied by, Music Theatre International, 545 Eighth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10018

New Orchestra Workshop Society presents

Hear it NOW

Fourth Annual Festival of New and Improvised Music. Featuring Vancouver's 13-piece NOW Orchestra with special guest artists from Québec René Lussier and Pierre Tanguay.

February 15 - 18, 1995

February 16 • René Lussier/Pierre Tanguay Duo

plus a quartet set featuring Coat Cooke & Paul Plimley

9:30 PM • Glass Slipper
(2714 Prince Edward) • \$10

February 17 • NOW Orchestra

featuring René Lussier & Pierre Tanguay

playing the music of René Lussier and Paul Plimley

9:30 PM • Glass Slipper
(2714 Prince Edward) • \$10

February 18 • François Houle and Ken Morrison

9:30 PM • Glass Slipper
(2714 Prince Edward) • \$10

Produced by New Orchestra Workshop Society.

Co-produced by the Western Front and Coastal Jazz and Blues Society.

Media Sponsor: Georgia Straight

Image: ION Design

Tickets available at all Ticketmaster outlets and at Highlife Records.

For information and tickets call the Jazz Hotline at 682-0706.

Charge By Phone 280-4444.



THE GEORGIA
straight