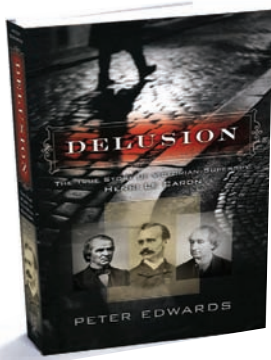


# Reviews



## MAN OF MYSTERY

### **Delusion: The True Story of Victorian Superspy Henri Le Caron**

by Peter Edwards

Key Porter Books, Toronto, 2008  
344 pp., illus., \$32.95 hardcover

**T**here may be no more fascinating, enigmatic, and simultaneously despised character in Canadian history than Henri Le Caron. During the span of his mysterious life he was alternately a U.S. Army officer, medical doctor, Irish revolutionary, bodysnatcher, businessman, loving family man, and, for twenty years, a master spy and informer for the fledgling Canadian intelligence service.

Peter Edwards, a reporter for the *Toronto Star*, has written a fascinating and highly readable biography of Le Caron's life and times. In his book *Delusion*, Edwards has gone beyond the boundaries of a conventional biography to paint a vivid picture of notable personalities and events in the Victorian Empire and United States of the late nineteenth century.

While Le Caron's exploits revolved around the machinations of the Irish revolutionary movement in North America, his activities had secondary involvements with a virtual who's who of characters, such as Louis Riel, Sir John A. Macdonald, Archbishop Alexandre Taché, U.S. presidents Andrew Johnson and Benjamin Harrison, and Irish nationalist Charles Stewart Parnell. Others who make cameo appearances in this tale include Jack the Ripper, Oscar Wilde, Queen Victoria, James McNeill Whistler, William Butler

Yeats, Karl Marx's daughter, and even a teenaged Winston Churchill.

Born into a large working-class British family, Thomas Beach was a restless, adventurous child. After several near disasters in Paris and Great Britain, he migrated to the United States for the express purpose of fighting in the Civil War. Enlisting as "Henri Le Caron," he saw significant action in the U.S. Army and rose to the rank of major.

After the war, one of his Union Army comrades became a leader in the Fenian, or Irish revolutionary, movement and invited Le Caron to join him. Le Caron's estranged father encouraged him to meet with government officials in Great Britain, and ultimately Le Caron became a member of the Irish revolutionary movement and a paid informer for his native country and his Queen. After twenty years of danger and double-dealing, he was forced to reveal himself at the stunning trial of Parnell, the charismatic Irish leader who would fall from grace as a result of the very public court proceedings.

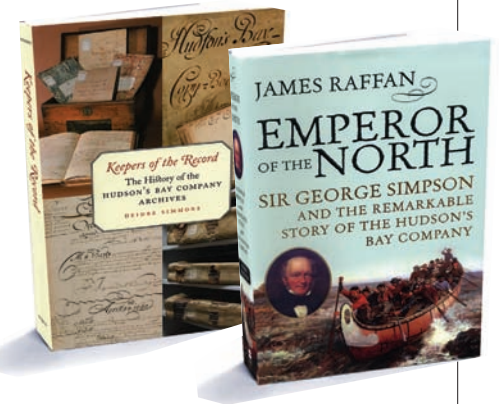
While I applaud Edwards' skill at weaving a rousing narrative, I have reservations about his treatment of the Irish leaders. As in most revolutionary societies, the methods of the Fenian Brotherhood and Clan-na-Gael were crude and desperate, but their courage and commitment were unquestionable. To some they were terrorists; to others they were valiant freedom fighters. Edwards tends to portray Irish leaders like General John O'Neill, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, and John Devoy as drunkards, buffoons, or, at best, deluded radicals.

The Irish revolutionary movements of the late nineteenth century were serious and formidable political forces that laid the foundation for the 1916 Easter Rising, and ultimately for the emergence of the Republic of Ireland in the twentieth century. I highly recommend that any reader interested in a different perspective on Irish revolutionary leaders consult Thomas Keneally's excellent book, *The Great Shame* (Anchor Books, 2000).

Despite my differences with Peter Edwards on his treatment of Irish revo-

lutionaries, I congratulate him on creating an entertaining book that reads more like a novel than a work of non-fiction. In *Delusion*, he successfully brings Henri Le Caron out of the shadows of history so that readers can decide for themselves if he was one of North America's greatest liars and scoundrels or one of the new Dominion of Canada's first heroes.

Reviewed by **P.G. Smith**, author of "War at the Border" in the October/November 2007 issue of *The Beaver*.



## DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

### **Emperor of the North: Sir George Simpson & the Remarkable Story of the Hudson's Bay Company**

by James Raffan

HarperCollins, Toronto, 2007  
484 pp., illus., \$34.95 hardcover

### **Keepers of the Record: The History of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives**

By Deirdre Simmons

McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2007  
384 pp., illus., \$80 hardcover

**A**fter reading James Raffan's biography of Sir George Simpson, I didn't know whether to like or dislike the Hudson's Bay Company's legendary governor. It seems Raffan felt this way, too, for he portrayed the stout little charismatic Scotsman, who almost immediately transformed the floundering fur enterprise into a solid business empire, as a man who possessed some disturbingly low qualities.

In an author's note to *Emperor of the North*, Raffan says: "I'll have to admit that some days I was not a fan of Sir George,