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‘Gerald Friesen, The Honourable John Norquay: Indigenous Premier, Canadian Statesman’

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Gerald Friesen, *The Honourable John Norquay: Indigenous Premier, Canadian Statesman* (University of Manitoba Press, 2024), 619pp. Hardback. C\$39.95. ISBN: 978-1-7728-4058-2.

This is a fascinating biography of Canada's first Indigenous Premier, John Norquay by one of Canada's leading historians, Gerald Freisen. The book is based on extensive research and explores the full extent of Norquay's life, from his birth to his death. John Norquay was Metis and became Premier of Manitoba in 1878, only nine years after Manitoba had joined Canada and become its fifth province. And he remained in that position also for nine years. This was a formative period not only for the province of Manitoba, but Canada more broadly. About the former, the terms of Manitoba's becoming a part of the Dominion of Canada were still being negotiated and Norquay was a strong advocate for his province in negotiations with the federal government in Ottawa, headed by the centralising Prime Minister John A. Macdonald. In terms of the latter, the federal government pursued a policy of western expansion in British North America and the development of agriculture, both of which very often took place at the expense of Indigenous nations in the region.

Unlike his more radical contemporary, the infamous Louis Riel, Norquay firmly believed that the interests of Indigenous nations in Manitoba could be best pursued by working within the system of the newly established Canadian state rather than advocating for a separate Metis nation. Freisen remarks that Norquay has consequently been described as the alter-ego of Riel. But it was not only with the federal government that Norquay had to spar. He also had to deal with railway barons who were very eager to open the west to large numbers of settlers who would be primarily employed in agriculture. The latter represented a direct threat to Indigenous nations in the newly formed province of Manitoba. One could concede that Norquay was facing unsurmountable forces. However, he persisted in trying to get the best possible deal that he could for his fellow Manitobans. And for this Freisen quite rightly praises him.

Something that John Norquay had to deal with unfortunately throughout his time as premier was institutional racism that lay at the heart of the Canadian settler-colonial project, as illustrated by Prime Minister Macdonald commenting that there 'was too much Indian in him'. But Norquay used an array of personal skills and strengths to fight against this prejudice to pursue what he believed were the best interests of Manitoba. Norquay was also very passionate about keeping corruption out of politics, committing to not profiting personally from being premier of the province. This reflected Norquay's strong Christian faith, specifically Protestant, on his political life. Norquay also never forgot where he came from, i.e. his Metis identity. He was the first Premier of Manitoba to be born in the province, specifically in the Red River Colony as was it was then known. This connection to the land of the province and its people made him a particularly passionate and effective leader.

Freisen describes Norquay as not only Canada's first Indigenous Premier, but also a Canadian Statesman. I think this is a very fair description of a unique individual. And Freisen does an excellent job of highlighting the historical significance of Norquay, both provincially and nationally. I thoroughly recommend this book to readers, both specialist and general. It makes a valuable contribution to not only the history of Manitoba, but the country more broadly. And it does this in a very engaging way and

draws on very rich archival material. It illustrates the power of biography, especially when put in a broader context, to historical work.

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