

**THE FALSE TRAITOR:  
LOUIS RIEL IN CANADIAN LITERATURE**

by

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**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Graduate Centre for Comparative Literature  
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*Abstract*

**The False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Literature**

The nineteenth-century Métis leader Louis Riel has emerged as one of the most popular--and elusive--figures in Canadian culture. Since his hanging for treason in 1885, the self-declared David of the New World has been depicted by Canadian novelists, poets, and playwrights variously as a traitor to Confederation; a French-Canadian and Catholic martyr; a bloodthirsty rebel; a pan-American liberator; a pawn of shadowy white forces; a Prairie political maverick; a First Nations hero; an alienated intellectual; a victim of Western industrial progress; and even a Father of Confederation. The primary objective of this thesis is to investigate how a historical figure, someone who supposedly existed in space and time, could be portrayed in such contradictory ways. Especially in light of the fact that most aesthetic representations of Riel bear little resemblance not only to one another but also to their ostensible model, it is suggested that those works are only nominally about the Métis leader himself. That is, they reveal less about the politician-mystic than they do about their authors and the society to which they belong.

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## Introduction

### The Constructed Real: Historical Figures in Literature

. . . The nice thing about Louis [Riel]  
was my mother always called him 'real'.  
Frank Davey (1985)

Louis Riel is simultaneously one of the most popular and most elusive figures in Canadian culture. Since his hanging for “high treason” on November 16, 1885 (D. Morton 1974, 371), he has been depicted variously as a traitor to Confederation; a French-Canadian and Catholic martyr; a bloodthirsty rebel; a New World liberator; a pawn of shadowy white forces; a Prairie political maverick; a First Nations hero; a deluded mystic; an alienated intellectual; a victim of Western industrial progress; and even a Father of Confederation (Osachoff 1982 and 1985; Owram 1982; Stanley 1986; Chris Johnson). This tremendous fluidity in the aesthetic representations of the Métis leader suggests that there is no necessary connection between an individual and the manner in which he or she is portrayed by novelists, poets, playwrights, and other artists. Yet the fact that Riel was a historical figure, someone who ostensibly lived in a particular place and time, gives him a certain concreteness or realness, to echo Frank Davey (49). The primary objective of this study is to document and analyze the numerous metamorphoses that Riel has undergone in Canadian

literature. While the focus is mainly on the contrasting ways he has been conceived by Canadian fiction writers in both French and English, representations in other media and from other countries are also examined. The study's central thesis is that the "realness" of historical figures imposes considerable restrictions on those who would write about them, as long as those writers allow the voices of their subjects to emerge. However, the reason that Riel changes so radically over time, and across space, is that most of the purported representations of the Métis politician-mystic are not really about him but about their authors and their specific social reality.

Historical fiction, a hybrid half of whose name qualifies if not nullifies the other half, is clearly a problematic, even "impossible", genre. As a consequence of its dual nature, it is torn between the awareness that it must be anchored in the real and the suspicion that true art is possible only by escaping the real, that a literary work cannot succeed if the author intends to write it with the "*Art of Verifying Dates* in hand" [*"Arte de Verificar as Datas na mão"*] (Manzoni 72; Garrett 1085). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle makes a categorical distinction between history and poetry, with the former dealing with the particular and the latter with the general. In his words, "The difference between a poet and a historian is this: the historian relates what has happened, the poet what could happen" (18). Although historical fiction can be traced as far back as the Homeric epics, in its modern incarnation, it is a relatively recent phenomenon and is thus not classified by the Greek philosopher. Still, considering that it combines two seemingly incompatible elements, the particular and the general, "fact" and "invention", perhaps it is not surprising that it has often been dismissed as somehow impure, not quite "a false genre, but a species of a false genre" (Manzoni 64, 81). As William Styron explains why he subtitled his novel about the slave rebel Nat Turner a "meditation on history," instead of a historical fiction, he wanted to spare his work "the curse of the historical novel". Or, as he adds, there is something

“disreputable” about historical fiction. It has a “bad odor” (qtd. in Barzelay and Sussman 94-5).

Dominated by the relationship between fact and fiction, the past and the present, and the text and the world, historical fiction tends to be found wanting in comparison to both of the entities that constitute it. It simply does not possess history’s claim to veracity, even if history’s own factualness is being increasingly called into question by writers and critics who contend that “history is a kind of fiction” and that “as verbal artifacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another” (Doctorow 25; H. White 1978, 122). No less significant from a literary perspective, it also lacks the textual autonomy of more purely aesthetic genres in which the writer is supposedly “judged [only] by the integrity or consistency of his verbal structure” (Frye 1963, 53). For instance, even the authors of such realistic personages as Emma Bovary or Duddy Kravitz do not have their creations measured against their specific empirical models. But that is invariably what happens in the analysis of historical novels, poems, and plays, which derive much of their appeal and power from the conviction that they are not invented but rather reflect some tangible, paratextual “reality” (Darmesteter 51). Moreover, such criticism is not only legitimate but to a degree inevitable. Since historical fiction implicitly refers to a reality outside and prior to itself, it demands to be evaluated in the context of that reality.

Of course, if one posits that a historical-literary work, or more specifically a historical figure in a literary work, has an existence outside the text, the challenge then is to determine the exact nature of that existence. This is obviously not a simple task. As various contemporary scholars have shown, reconstructions of the past are always complex endeavours. In the words of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, alluding to a parable from classical Sanskrit literature, to try to capture the truth of a past reality is akin to attempting to reproduce “elusive, rather ethereal, and by now wholly departed elephants from the footprints they have left on [the researcher’s] mind.”

In addition to being moulded by such factors as the author's personality, gender, and sociocultural circumstances, historical-literary representations are also shaped by the tropological modes or "strategies" in which they happen to be narrated (Geertz 167; H. White 1978, 125). The most formidable obstacle facing anyone examining historical figures in literature, though, is not political or stylistic but philosophical: the frequent equation of history with the past.

Northrop Frye once asserted that as physicists study physics, not nature proper, literary critics do not study literature but "the criticism of literature. . . . Literature is not a subject of study, but an object of study" (1957, 11). Similarly, it seems that for the student of historical figures in literature his or her subject is not the figures themselves but their textual representations. The reason one cannot investigate the past is that most of it is inaccessible. All one can really know is not the past as such but the recorded or "articulated past," to cite Robert Penn Warren's definition of history (1989, 51). History, even if it comprises not only written documents but "[t]out ce que l'homme dit ou écrit, tout ce qu'il fabrique, tout ce qu'il touche" (Bloch 27), remains a mere fraction of what transpires in space and time. It is also socially constructed by "linguistic description", rather than found, since history, not just fiction, requires the transformation of raw data by the imagination (H. White 1989, 35; Warren 1969, 117). Nonetheless, the fact that historical or historical-literary representations are not unmediated reflections of the empirical past does not indicate that they are all equally "ideological". For while it may be true that all stories are constructed as they are "translat[ed] into a written form," and are to a degree "fictions", they do not all bear the same relationship to the archival record and are thus not all "equally false" (H. White 1987, 187; 1989, 27; Penn 102).

History, like ideology, has been the subject of much heated debate in the last few decades. To begin with, the term has two distinct meanings, signifying both the "events" and "actions" that

happened in the past and “the record of the past that historians write.” Or to phrase it differently, it refers to “an object of study” as well as “to an account of this object” (Warren 1969, 117; H. White 1987, 55). Also, at least since the publication of Hayden White’s groundbreaking *Metahistory* in 1973, it has become almost axiomatic to contend that historical reality is purely “discursive”. To quote White, an intellectual historian specializing in post-Enlightenment European historiography, his studies demonstrate that “every history” is “emplotted in some way.” Contrary to what most nineteenth-century historians professed, he says, “facts do not speak for themselves”, it is “the historian [that] speaks for them, speaks on their behalf” (1973, 8; 1978, 125). That is, White questions not only the historical text’s ability to refer to a paratextual reality but also its claim to objective reality. As he maintains, the production of meaning is highly arbitrary, more a “performance” than a documentary act, since “any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories” (1987, 44).

The emergence of “White’s epistemological relativism” (Kansteiner 278) coincides with a new understanding of the concept of ideology. For literary scholars like Lennard Davis and Linda Hutcheon, ideology is not the belief system “of a particular class or group;” a set of “illusory beliefs--false ideas or false consciousness”; or even “the general process of the production of meanings and ideas.” Rather, it is “the vast signifying system that, in its interpenetration with the individual psyche, makes things ‘mean’ something to a culture and individuals in that culture”; it is the way “a culture represents itself to itself” (Williams 55; Davis 15, 24; Hutcheon 1989, 49). As Davis elaborates, “Ideology constitutes the sum of that which a culture needs to believe about itself as opposed to what it really is” (25). The difficulty with such an all-encompassing definition of ideology is that no mechanism is provided to determine what a society “really” is. By necessity,

ideology is being delineated against a non-ideological level of reality that is not only undefined but appears to be a logical impossibility. Still, it is against this elusive and utopian construct that all social discourse is judged deficient, inherently subjective. To quote Hutcheon, who has stated that a certain historical novelist's Riel "both is and is not the Riel of Canadian history", "there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just others' truths" (1987, 180; 1988, 109).

There are clearly positive aspects to this belief in a plurality of truths, allowing as it does for the emergence of hitherto silenced or marginalized voices. However, it also has some serious flaws, since its radical relativism precludes those voices from ever becoming dominant even in the discourse about themselves. For, if there is no single truth but only other people's truths, then no voice is any more valid or privileged than any other. As W.S. Penn has vehemently protested, the recent complimentary representations of "the Indians at Wounded Knee" are supposed to be "mythic inventions of the same order" as those that presented General Custer as the "innocent" victim of barbarism earlier in the century (102). Presumably, a claim that the New World was uninhabited when the European explorers first landed on its shores should also be taken at face value, since most of the evidence to the contrary is textual and thus ideological, tainted. Its irony aside, the last comment is not merely a rhetorical one. The fact is that some of Canada's most prominent intellectuals have asserted that the country's very name suggests that it had no history prior to European contact. Their evidence is that the word Canada does not derive from *kanata*, Wendat or Huron for "town" or "cluster of dwellings" (Rayburn 11), but from the Portuguese phrase "*Cá nada*," which supposedly means "No one here" (Frye 1967, 122; Mandel 30; Staines 7). "*Cá nada*" actually means "nothing here," as opposed to "no one here", and therefore it would seem relatively easy to prove that this interpretation is etymologically suspect, if not politically

specious. (To further complicate the case, in Portuguese Canada is not pronounced with the stress on the first a but on the last one; not Cah-na-da but Ca-na-dah, as is indicated by the spelling, *Canadá*.) But with the conflation of the factual and the fictive and the assertion of the relativity of truth, there are no real grounds for questioning even such a dubious reading. After all, whatever one may think of its accuracy or politics, it does reflect some people's truths.

If nothing else, what the current debate on the nature of reality underscores is the need to acknowledge the ontological difference between primary and secondary representations. Primary representations, which are those by individuals who either participate in or witness empirical events, purport to be informed by a direct knowledge of a reality outside the text. They are not necessarily more empirically factual than secondary representations, as is evident in Riel's self-figuration as the "David" of the New World--as well as the "Daniel", "Jerimiah", and "Elijah" of "the Christian era" (II, 75; III, 322-3).<sup>1</sup> Or as Robert Browning cautions in *The Ring and the Book*, "who trusts/ To human testimony for a fact/ Gets this sole fact--himself is proved a fool" (621). Yet primary representations must be granted primacy for the simple reason that they are foundational texts. They are the ur-texts that make possible all subsequent historical or historical-literary discourse on a given subject and from which that discourse derives much of its authority and legitimacy.

Secondary representations, in contrast, are quite different. Unlike primary representations, which can be evaluated only in light of their internal inconsistencies and contradictions or in relation to the narrative-generated "context-beyond the text" (Wilkinson 85), they must be

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all references to Riel's works are to *The Collected Writings/ Les écrits complets*, under the direction of George F.G. Stanley; the Roman numerals refer to the volume and the Arabic ones to the page. Also, even though Riel's spelling and grammar can be rather idiosyncratic, all quotations from his writings are reproduced as printed by Stanley, et al.

assessed in reference to those earlier accounts. While the border between story and discourse is a porous one, as “the *what* of the story told” is inevitably affected by “the *how* of its presentation” (O’Neill 13), secondary representations cannot add new “facts” to the archival record but merely provide new interpretations of it. That is, they are not history proper; they are textual exegeses. Ironically, secondary representations are better grounded in a tangible reality than are primary ones. Since they coexist in a symbiotic relationship with humanly constructed but extant texts, as opposed to an empirical past many of whose “traces” have forever vanished (Wilkinson 80), they can be examined with an objectivity that first-hand narrations cannot. By comparing secondary representations to their sources, one can actually verify the accuracy of their claims. In other words, one can determine the ideological variation among those works instead of just presuming that they are all “equally representative, equally interpretative of [their] proper milieu” (H. White 1987, 187), a platitude that appears to preclude the need to read a body of texts that one has *a priori* judged.

In the case of a study of the representations of Riel, a most controversial individual who has become a symbol not only of “both Canadian unity and Canadian disunity” but even of “the dividing line between fact and fiction” (Moore 1992, 413), one must begin with the primary texts by the Métis leader himself and his acquaintances. After all, it is only from those works, whether produced by his supporters or his enemies, that one can sketch an empirically-informed portrait of the subject. Considering that Riel exhibited different selves at different stages of his life, it is possible that two or more seemingly contradictory characterizations of him could be historically accurate, depending on their time frame. Still, it does not follow that every play, novel, or poem about the “crucifix waving dude” who has become the most prominent figure in Canadian culture is equally sound (Suknaski 3; Moore 1992, 411). Indeed, the primary reason for privileging Riel’s

archival record is that it enables one to differentiate between the aspects of a representation that are shaped by collective memory and those that are the willful invention of its author. It is because of that foundational yardstick that one can establish the relation--if any--between the man who was convicted of being “a false traitor” to the Canadian Crown (D. Morton 1974, 3) and his portraits as “Canada’s Joan of Arc” (Lusty 5), the “Che Guevara of the Métis people” (Siggins 293), “the David Koresh of his day” (Bercuson and Cooper), or the precursor and “modest Canadian counterpart” of the Ayatollah Khomeini (D. Morton 1992, 59), to cite only a few.

Needless to say, there are limitations to such a historical approach. For example, except in passing, it will not allow one to evaluate a specific text’s literary value. It will also not permit one to inquire whether a historical fiction can succeed as literature even though it is historically inaccurate. But as stated at the outset, while this study deals mainly with literary texts, its focus is less strictly literary than cultural. Its central aim is not to identify the great masterpieces on Louis Riel, which it has been convincingly argued tend not to be literary but historical (Duffy 207), but rather to trace the tremendous permutations his reputation has undergone in Canadian literature. In particular, it will attempt to ascertain the possible political motivation for such disparate representations of the same historical individual and, at the same time, to show how a society must come to terms with competing narratives when it transforms into a national hero someone it had hanged as a traitor.

History, as the totality of the articulated past, is not only partial but also inherently biased. It invariably favours privileged individuals and groups in society, the famous and the notorious, as well as those either powerful enough to commission their own life stories or articulate enough to produce them themselves. Traditionally, it has been peopled almost exclusively by so-called world historical men, the “movers and shakers” who, among other characteristics, share the privilege of

having their lives widely documented (Brown 3-4). Marginalized figures obviously seldom enter the hallowed domain of history. Moreover, when they do, their stories tend to be framed not from their perspective but from that of the very people who have defeated or oppressed them. For example, to restrict oneself to First Nations or mixed-race figures in settler societies, the earliest accounts of the Ghost Dance movement that emerged in the U.S. Great Plains in the 1870s emanated not from its “messiah,” the Paiute prophet Wovoka, but from antagonistic white journalists (Mooney 7). The dominant narrative about Antônio Conselheiro’s role in the Canudos War of 1896-97 was also not written by the millenarian preacher or one of his followers but by a representative of the Brazilian coastal society that obliterated them (Cunha 407-8). Lastly, the pivotal text about Jandamarra’s rebellion against white settlement in the Kimberleys of Western Australia was not authored by the Bunuba “rebel” or some other Aborigine but by a white writer. Indeed, Ion Idriess’s novel *Outlaws of the Leopolds* (1952) has made such an imprint that the first Black Australian novelist to write on the subject, Colin Johnson (1979),<sup>2</sup> uses it as his main source (Shoemaker 137-45).

Riel, however, is an exception to this general invisibility of marginalized figures. Like Maxamad Cabdulle Xasan, the Somali poet-mystic who led the resistance against British colonial rule at the turn of the century and with whom he has much in common (Laurence 1964), Riel is actually the single most important generating-source of his own mythology. Despite the 1885 Regina verdict, he has emerged not so much as a martyr, to say nothing of a traitor, but as a “posthumous victor.” The Métis leader’s triumph was never more evident than when the Canada

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<sup>2</sup> The Aboriginality of Colin Johnson, who is also known as Mudrooroo, has been recently called into question after his sister suggested that their paternal ancestors were not Aboriginal, as the author has long insisted, but Afro-American. However, the issue is obviously a complicated one, since the “identity Mudrooroo has claimed is the one he experienced from early childhood, lived through in orphanages with other Aboriginal children” (M. Hughes 22-3).

Council and several universities contributed generously to the publication of all his writings, an honour that has not been bestowed on any other prominent Canadian cultural, military, or political figure, including the country's first prime minister--and Riel's nemesis--Sir John A. Macdonald (Fetherling 30; Owsram 207, 215; Bumsted 1987). So widely accepted is Riel's interpretation of his conflicts with Ottawa that it has virtually silenced the views of his adversaries. To quote the historian Desmond Morton, the very idea of presenting the people who fought the politician-mystic as Canadian nationalists and patriots, even if it would do no "offence to the known facts," is simply too outlandish (1992, 51; French). Notwithstanding all the above, Riel's victory must be qualified, for it may be a Pyrrhic one. The fact is that something fundamental occurs to the man from Saint Boniface in his journey from pariah to hero--he is Canadianized. Riel may still be considered the "archetypal marginal ex-centric," but he is unquestionably a Canadian symbol of peripheralness; he is "the Canadian" (Hutcheon 1988, 4-5). That is, in order to be turned into an icon by the descendants of the people who opposed and hanged him, Riel is deprived of his Otherness, his national specificity as a Métis. The violence that this denationalization does to his story is rather apparent in his writings, and for that reason this study opens with a close reading of them.

Chapter I, "The Mythmaker: Riel Writes Riel," investigates the way Riel portrays himself in his poetry and prose. It focuses especially on his construction of himself and the New Nation, proposing that neither entity is a constant one. Throughout his writings Riel's idea of the Métis nation evolves from being a branch of the greater French-Canadian family in North America, to a pan-Métis confederation (French-speaking as well as English, Catholic and Protestant), and finally to a unitary Franco-Catholic Métis society. Not surprisingly, as his collective identity evolves over time, so does his personal one. In fact, it may not be at all amiss to contend that Riel's work is

essentially a quest for a feasible and stable national body with which he can identify, and that the failure of his political dream is directly connected to his inability to poetically imagine or construct such a reality.

Entitled “The Traitor: Riel as an Enemy of Confederation,” Chapter II traces the image of Riel as a nation-wrecker. These representations are most popular at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth and are predominantly, but not exclusively, in English. One of the more fascinating works on the theme is actually Robert de Roquebrune’s *D’un océan à l’autre*, a 1924 novel whose avowed intention is nothing less than to demonstrate to the outside world that Canadians are of pure French and English stock and that “il n’y a pas de métis chez nous” (10). In addition to their proclivity to minimize Riel’s political significance, some of them even asserting that Riel was only the nominal leader of the two North-West conflicts, the most common characteristic of these texts is how their authors depict as an arch-traitor someone they usually do not perceive as a fellow citizen.

Chapter III, “The Martyr (I): Riel as an Ethnic and Religious Victim of Confederation,” concentrates on English Canada’s alleged bigotry toward the Métis leader. In contrast to the representations in the previous chapter, these emanate mainly from French-speaking, Catholic Quebec. But, like the former, they too are most prominent at the turn of the century. They also tend not to focus on their reputed protagonist, giving credence to Gilles Martel’s thesis that both French- and English-speaking Canada are unable to transcend their “querelles ethnocentriques” and accept that Riel’s story is not their own but “le drame d’une *autre* collectivité” (1979, 155).

As its title suggests, “The Go-between: Riel as a Cultural Mediator,” Chapter IV centres on those texts that portray Riel as an intermediary among the various ethnocultural, religious, and regional groups in Canada. Largely a post-World War II phenomenon, the theme reflects the

gradual “collapse, for North American eyes, of the meta-narrative that once went by the name Europe. Europa” (Kroetsch 1989, 23). Following the catastrophic events across the Atlantic, many Euro-Canadian writers embark on a journey of self-indigenization. As Margaret Laurence writes, “Canadians who, like myself, are the descendants of various settlers. . . , must hear native peoples’ voices and ultimately become part of them” or “perish” (1965, 235). However, instead of attempting to bond directly with the country’s indigenous inhabitants, the authors who write on the subject usually opt to use Riel as a bridge between themselves and the First Nations.

Chapter V, “The Martyr (II): Riel as a Sociopolitical Victim of Confederation,” is in many ways a continuation of Chapter III. The significant difference is that Riel is no longer perceived as a victim of English-Canadian ethnic or religious chauvinism but rather of Canada’s transcontinental dream, if not of Western civilization itself. Riel, like the Métis as a whole, is just another casualty of the all-consuming ideology of progress; he is a symbol of the pastoral world that seems destined to give way to the new industrial universe. Increasingly, at least for English-speaking Canadian writers, the politician-mystic also emerges as the quintessential ancestor. He is the representative of a truly American culture that, instead of seeing the land as an enemy whose only use is to be exploited, is at one with it. Of course, such a genealogical embrace is not without consequences. For in order to claim Riel as their own, those writers “en mal d’identité” (Morisset 1987, 60) are often forced either to demonize their own biocultural ancestors as psychological or teratological freaks or, what is more frequent, to pretend that they never existed.

The subject of the representations examined in Chapter VI, “The Mystic/ Madman: Riel as a Pararational Individual,” is arguably the most controversial aspect of the Métis leader’s life, his mental state. For some writers, Riel is an enlightened but misunderstood mystic, and thus sane. Other writers, however, are no less certain that he is a megalomaniac with visions of grandeur

who would stop at nothing to achieve his goals. Paradoxically, at least at the turn of the century, it is Riel's supporters who strive most passionately to prove that he is insane, while his enemies, particularly the government of Canada, systematically attempt to demonstrate that he is mentally responsible.

Finally, extrapolating from the enormous diversity of representations of Louis Riel in the last century and a half, the study explores why the "footnote to minor colonial history" who has made "it into the company of William Tell, Robin Hood and El Cid" (Moore 1992, 411) is likely to remain central to the Canadian imagination for some time to come. It also ponders the ambiguity of the charges levelled against Riel in 1885 as a "false traitor" to Canada (D. Morton 1974, 3), an accusation that gives this work its title and that simultaneously connotes an evil person and a non-traitor. It then concludes with the contention that the appropriation of Riel as an ancestor in Canadian literature since the middle of the twentieth century reflects a major cultural shift not only in Canada but in the whole of the Americas, a change in consciousness that has culminated in non-First Nations people for the first time seeing themselves as Americans. In other words, the transformation of Riel into the archetypal Canadian probably says less about the Métis leader than it does about the evolving collective identity of the descendants or at least "héritiers spirituels" of the people who hanged him (Morisset 1989, 50).

## Chapter I

### The Mythmaker: Riel Writes Riel

Je suis le Prophète, le Pontife Infaillible,  
le Prêtre Roi. . . .

Louis Riel (1876)

In his testimony during his 1885 trial for treason Riel made three central points: He was not insane, as his own lawyers repeatedly urged him to plead; he was divinely inspired, both politically and poetically; and he was a child of the North-West. The matters of his sanity and divine inspiration, which will be examined in greater detail in the last chapter, are perhaps ultimately insoluble. At this juncture, it is sufficient to say that Riel was well aware that his self-perception was not universally shared. As he acknowledged, instead of accepting him as God's "Infaillible témoin", the world considered him "fou" and, he said, "se rit de moi" (II, 86; IV, 140). The question of his collective identity, however, is far more tangible, and more problematic. Contrary to the impression created by the later Riel, his ethnonational affiliation was not constant throughout his life. While he tended to describe himself as Métis, he envisaged the group with a radically different composition across time, ranging from a branch of the greater French-Canadian family in North America, through a bilingual and bi-religious society, to a unitary Franco-Catholic

people. To quote Glen Campbell's semiotic analysis, for the politician-mystic "the lexeme 'Métis' is not monosemic," "the signifier. . . does not always refer to the same signified" (1985, 33, 31). Indeed, as delineated in his writings, Riel's life was essentially a search for a sociopolitical realm he could fully embrace, a quest for a mythical country that remained nebulous even in his imagination.

Riel was not exactly the most typical Métis, a people of mixed European and First Nations ancestry whose principal occupation was hunting buffalo and trading furs (Stanley 1963, 4-5).<sup>1</sup> The oldest of eleven children, Riel was born into a devout Catholic, French-speaking family, in Saint Boniface, Red River Settlement--present-day Winnipeg--on either October 22 or 23, 1844 (Flanagan 1996, 4; G. Martel 1984, 389-90). His mother was Julie Lagimodière, the Western-born daughter of a transplanted couple from Lower Canada or Quebec--her own mother was the legendary Marie-Anne Gaboury, the first white woman to become a permanent resident of what are now the Canadian Prairies. His father, also named Louis Riel, was the son of a voyageur originally from Quebec and a Métis woman of Québécois and Chipewyan descent (Dugas 8; Champagne 151). In other words, the future leader of the Métis, who would base his people's "titre" to the North-West almost exclusively on its "sang indien", was only one-eighth First Nations. Or as he himself writes, "presque tout mon sang vient de la France" (III, 279; II, 72).

Riel's father too was not a traditional buffalo hunter or freighter but a farmer and mill owner. That is, he was part of the small, Quebec-centred Métis bourgeoisie, although bourgeoisie

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<sup>1</sup> The definition of the term Métis, French for the offspring of different races, has changed considerably over the last century and a half (Payment 1-9). There were actually two mixed-race groups in the North-West, the predominantly Protestant and English-speaking Halfbreeds and the mainly Catholic and French-speaking *métis*. Since Riel used the two terms interchangeably, his example is followed here--except when it is necessary to specify that someone belonged to either of the two subgroups.

may be somewhat of a misnomer for a community that had as yet “given no priest to the church, no lawyer to the courts of Assiniboia, no doctor to practise among his people” (W. Morton 16). Raised and educated in Quebec--he entered the Oblate novitiate but soon realized he did not have the calling and left the seminary--the senior Riel had played a critical role in the historic “affaire Sayer” of 1849. This was an embryonic rebellion, provoked by the arrest and imprisonment of Guillaume Sayer and three other Métis hunters, which virtually ended the Hudson’s Bay Company’s monopoly in fur trading in the North-West (Stanley 1963, 3, 14). The incident would also become for the Métis “un prototype héroïque d’une lutte nationale” and for Riel’s oldest son and namesake, “un catalyseur d’espérance” (G. Martel 1984, 93). Yet, in spite of the family’s standing in the community, its economic circumstances were chronically precarious, being “always deeply in debt” to the omnipresent Company of Adventurers (Flanagan 1996, 5). Thus, when the young Riel was sent to study for the priesthood in Quebec in June 1858--along with two other Métis boys, Daniel McDougall and Louis Schmidt--he was not supported financially by his parents. Rather, he was assisted by the Bishop Alexandre Taché and, through the Catholic prelate of Saint Boniface, the influential Masson family of Terrebonne, Quebec (Siggins 46; Désilets 24, 71).

The Red River seminarian appears to have been acutely aware of his dependency on others from the moment he arrived at the Sulpician-run Collège de Montréal, as is evident in the earliest of his extant texts. In two end-of-year letters to his “Vénérée Bienfaitrice” Sophie Masson, one in 1861 and the other in 1862, Riel expresses his discomfort at being “l’objet d’une bienveillance dont je suis si indigne” and regrets that he will probably never be able to repay the Seigneuresse of Terrebonne for “les monuments de bienfaisance dont vous me dotez tous les jours” (I, 1-2). Even considering the formal tone of the letters, which suggests that they may have been dictated by the

priests, it is difficult not to notice his sensitivity concerning his position. The reason for Riel's self-consciousness about his indigence is that it is not just personal and familial--he notes that the Massons had already done "la même faveur. . . à mon cher papa" (I, 9; Stanley 1963, 17)--but also ethnonational. Actually, throughout his writings, Riel draws a parallel between his marginality and that of the Métis. As he is individually dependent on the patronage of Bishop Taché and the Masson family for his education, so must the Métis people collectively rely on the spiritual and political protection of Quebec against all external foes.

Especially for the young Riel, his sense of collective insecurity leads him to regard Quebec not just as his people's protector but also as their progenitor. For him, after divine Providence, only the French-speaking Catholic society on the Saint Lawrence River can shield the Métis from the rapacious designs of their mortal enemy, Upper Canada or Ontario. As he writes in the poem "O Québec" (1870):

Des ennemis fort à craindre  
Menaçant le berceau de tes enfants chéris.  
Mais ils ne pourront atteindre,  
O Québec! Malgré toi, jamais notre pays!  
Que la sainte Providence  
Inspire à notre égard tes hommes d'ottawa  
Souviens-toi combien la France  
Te fit mal! O Québec! Lorsqu'Elle t'oublia! (IV, 95-6)

Riel contrasts favourably Quebec's "gloire", which he asserts will always be its "religion", to Ontario's crass material "politique". However, his appeal is less spiritual than historical or cultural. Quebec ought to support the Métis, not because it is a Catholic society, but because it is

its “Mère Colonie!”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, like any loving parent, it must not abandon its offspring and spare itself “la douleur/ de voir écraser tes braves/ Tes fiers enfants du Nord, héritiers de ton Coeur!” (IV, 95-6).

The degree to which Riel perceives the Métis as an extension of Quebec is particularly noticeable in his Collège de Montréal poems, none of which deals directly with what he would later call “la nation métisse” (IV, 90). For instance, the fable “Le chat et les souris” (1864-5) is an allegorical exploration of the brutal consequences of political oppression--or more specifically, English oppression of foreign subjects. In the poem, an aristocratic and pitiless English cat lives exclusively from hunting mice. At his sumptuous table, he:

Ne se servait jamais de plat plus délectable

Que la chair de souris.

Il en avait toujours. Ses parents, ses amis

Venaient-ils faire visite?

De sa viande favorite

Il préparait lui-même le goûté. (IV, 26)

As the cat holds one of his frequent feasts, the mice decide to meet in “assemblée” and their worst fears are confirmed. When they count themselves, they discover that their numbers have dwindled precipitously because of the cat’s activities. Still the mice, who are described as a “nation” and a “peuple”, do not despair about their fate. Convinced that every oppressive act engenders its own retribution, they form an army and proceed toward the cat’s palatial residence, determined to

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<sup>2</sup> Riel’s colonial subservience to Quebec is conspicuously downplayed, if not effaced, in Paul Savoie’s translation of the poem. For example, Savoie renders “Mère Colonie” as “our motherland”; “Province chérie” as “beloved home”; “le berceau de tes enfants chéris” as “your descendants’ place of birth”; and completely expunges the line “O Québec! Malgré toi, jamais notre pays!” (Riel 1993, 47).

attack their enemy “en masse./ De le dévorer vif, l’écorcher, le manger,/ De s’en venger” (IV, 26, 28). After much waiting, the battalion at last spots the cause of its misery and, as one:

Lui saute sur le dos, pardevant, parderrière

Dessus, dessous, en flanc

Grafigne, mord, déchire avec acharnement.

Le chat crie. Il se sert de ses dents et de ses pattes

Non sans endommager ces troupes délicates.

Elles tiennent toujours.

Aucune sans frapper le chat n’est abattue.

Lui, furieux, bondit, miaule, enrage, tue.

Les victimes pourtant vendent bien cher leurs jours.

Soudain dans sa fureur au dernier point accrue

Le chat semant la mort par un coup perd la vue.

Dans la fort mêlée, alors il disparaît,

Tout grouillant de souris, enterré sous leur nombre. (IV, 28)

The incensed cat somehow manages to escape yet, in the end, he is unable to deprive his subjects of the “joies de la vengeance.” He subsequently dies “enragé” and the battered but proud mice emerge victorious, as was their destiny. In the poem’s final words, “Le bon droit est ainsi toujours vengé” (IV, 28).

“Le chat et les souris,” which is one of Riel’s best known and most critically respected works, is important for two distinct reasons. First, it typifies what has been called the author’s “morale. . . vengeresse” or “conception némésiaque de la vie humaine”, his conviction that the oppressed can never be defeated since God will intervene in temporal affairs and punish whoever

has abused them (Runte 21; G. Martel 1984, 115; Braz 1996, 22). Second, and perhaps even more important in terms of his collective identity, the poem illustrates the extent to which Riel considers Quebec not just his people's ancestral homeland but their actual homeland. For whereas the cat is unambiguously described as being "Anglais" or "Saxon"--the poem was the object of "corrections stylistiques, grammaticales et politiques", which resulted in the word "Anglais" being replaced by "Noble" and "Saxon" by "héros" (Runte 19-20)--it is not so apparent who the mice are supposed to be, either the Métis (Runte 27; Siggins 55) or all French-speaking Canadians (Campbell 1993, 128; Flanagan 1996, 11).

Although Riel's "national" identification with Quebec never ceases completely, it becomes far less pronounced after the mid-1860s. This is an ideological shift likely precipitated by the tumultuous events in his private life, notably the death of his beloved father in 1864. The then nineteen-year-old had always idealized, if not idolized, his begetter. Posterity has tended to judge the senior Riel largely as an ineffectual farmer and businessman, "the famous 'Miller of the Seine' who never milled nothing," to cite a partisan account (Wiebe 1977, 12). Yet, for his oldest son, he was always a symbol of Métis national pride and moral rectitude. He was the dauntless hero who, through his courage and faith, had "renversé un colosse d'iniquités" and whose name was destined to grow "d'âge en âge dans tout le Nord Ouest" (Riel III, 267). Thus it is not surprising that the young man would be deeply affected by the news that his father had died suddenly after an undetermined but "painful illness". Indeed, so traumatized was Riel by the loss that, before long, he would abandon his plans to become the first Métis priest in the North-West and leave not just the Collège de Montréal but Montreal itself (Siggins 58).

There was probably one other factor that led Riel to reassess his relationship with Quebec, the social rejection he purportedly experienced there. Soon after abandoning his sacerdotal

studies, or being forced to abandon them (Siggins 62; Flanagan 1996, 20), Riel became secretly betrothed to a young Montreal woman named Marie-Julie Guernon. However, Guernon's parents did not approve of her romantic involvement with the Métis ex-seminarian and demanded that she cancel the wedding, a decision generally interpreted as being racially motivated (Stanley 1963, 33). The rejection by his fiancée's family appears to have crystallized Riel's growing estrangement from Quebec society, his "conscience d'être un étranger parmi ses semblables" (G. Martel 1984, 114), and convinced him that it was time to return home. Therefore, after eight years in Montreal, he left the city and embarked on a fateful journey that would lead him to two years of seemingly aimless wandering through various communities of the Quebec diaspora in the eastern half of the United States, from New England to Minnesota; the command of two Métis armed confrontations with the government of Canada; a series of mental breakdowns; a religious epiphany in which he was supposedly declared the Prophet of the New World; and, finally, his hanging for high treason at Regina in 1885.

Whether triggered by his father's death, the rebuff by Marie-Julie Guernon's family, or a combination of the two, the fact is that after Riel arrived back in Saint Boniface in July 1868, he for the first time began to articulate an explicit Métis nationalism. There is certainly no equivalent in his Montreal works to the unambiguous celebration of his mixed-race roots expressed in the poem "La métisse" (1870):

Je suis métisse et je suis orgueilleuse  
 D'appartenir à cette nation  
 Je sais que Dieu de sa main généreuse  
 Fait chaque peuple avec attention  
 Les métis sont un petit peuple encore

Mais vous pouvez voir déjà leurs destins

Etre haïs comme ils sont les honore.

Ils ont déjà rempli de grands desseins. (IV, 88)

Or, as he has the heroine add, if she ever falls in love, she will choose as “mon fidèle amant/ Un des soldats de la petite armée”, the valiant soldiers who are making it possible for the Métis to have “notre Province” (IV, 88-9).

The same Métis national pride is also evident in Riel’s emotional reaction to the incendiary comments by Charles Mair about the people of Red River, especially the women. The author of Confederation’s “first significant collection of verse” in English, and an avid promoter of Canadian expansion, Mair had recently arrived from Ontario as the paymaster of the crew sent by Ottawa to build a road between the Lake of the Woods and the Settlement (Shrive vi, 55). In a letter to his brother Holmes, which was published in several Canadian newspapers, Mair waxed poetic about the North-West, a land “boundless and rich beyond all description or comparison” and blessed with a “delightful” climate. In fact, so fertile was the soil that the “half-breeds are the only people here who are starving. Five thousand of them have to be fed this winter, and it is their own fault, they won’t farm” (1868, 396, 398). Even less tactfully, Mair also remarked on the social relations in the community. After stating that “I received hospitalities to my heart’s content,” he noted that there were “jealousies and heart-burnings” between the local mixed-race and white women. To quote Mair, many prosperous white men “are married to half-breed women, who, having no coat of arms but a ‘totem’ to look back to, make up for the deficiency by biting at the backs of their ‘white’ sisters.” The latter, in turn, “fall back upon their whiteness, whilst the husbands meet each other with desperate courtesies and hospitalities, with a view to filthy lucre in the background” (1868, 396).

While Mair's appraisal of social life at Red River is believed to contain at least "a germ of truth" (Van Kirk 1980, 239), it is also clearly graceless, and the response to it by his injured hosts was both swift and unequivocal. Annie Bannatyne, a Halfbreed woman married to one of the richest merchants in the community, cornered Mair in the post office and publicly horsewhipped him, telling the author-bureaucrat that "c'est ainsi que les femmes de la Rivière-Rouge traitent ceux qui les insultent" (Dumas 27-8; Shrive 73). Alexander Begg, the business partner of Bannatyne's husband and a future historian, sought his revenge by savagely lampooning "the celebrated!! poet" as a braggart with a weakness for "the Red River belles" in what is considered to be Western Canada's first historical novel, *Dot-It-Down* (1869-70, 156; 1871, 281; Shrive 774-7). Riel's riposte was also literary, but no less personal. In a long letter to the Montreal newspaper *Le nouveau monde*, he ridicules Mair's claim to know the North-West. Riel particularly resents the Ontarian's insinuation that the Métis have become dependent on "la charité publique," and sarcastically suggests that Mair should restrict himself to verse, "car par là au moins ses écrits auraient le mérite de la rime puisqu'ils n'ont pas toujours celui du bon sens." Tellingly, to establish his authority to speak on behalf of the people of Red River, he states simply, "je suis métis moi" (I, 13-15).

Considering that several conflicting nationalisms coexist in Riel, the articulation of any of them of course can never be systematic or uncomplicated. This becomes apparent the moment one realizes that "La métisse" and the reply to Mair's letter were written about the same time as "O Québec," a poem which speaks of the Métis not as a separate people but as Quebec's children, "tes Métis-Canadiens" (IV, 95). Nevertheless, there is little doubt that upon leaving Montreal Riel became far more conscious of his Métis identity, of his belonging to "la nation naissante des Métis" (I, 165). If anything, this awareness is even more pervasive after his religious epiphany in

1875, a development for which there may be biographical explanations.

When Riel returned to Red River in 1868, he arrived just in time to assume the leadership of the amorphous forces beginning to resist the planned transfer of the North-West from the Hudson's Bay Company to the newly formed Canadian Confederation. The transaction, which was finally scheduled to occur on December 1, 1869, was opposed by most of the residents of the Settlement for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the fact that they had not been consulted on what amounted to "la vente et l'achat" of a people (Groulx 1944, 4). Resistance was especially pronounced amongst Red River's two mixed-race groups, the French-speaking *métis* and the English-speaking Halfbreeds. So Riel proceeded to rally the "deux sections de la Population" to work together to repel the Eastern invaders by appealing both to their sense of solidarity and to that great cement of nations, their "grievances" (Riel I, 24; Lipking 205, 213). In his words to his compatriots, the Métis are "tous des frères et des parents" and therefore "ne font plus qu'un" (I, 25, 53). As a people they also have been abominably treated and thus have not just the right but the obligation to rebel against "la compagnie qui nous vend et veut nos livrer et contre le Canada qui veut nous acheter" (I, 25).

Riel succeeded in convincing the inhabitants of Red River that, if they wished their foes to deal with them on a "noble pied d'égalité", they had to form a government and army of their own. Then he and his almost exclusively francophone followers, led by his much esteemed Adjutant-General Ambroise Lépine, captured Fort Garry (Riel I, 91; Schmidt 8 Feb. 1912, 4). The chief aim of their "bloodless coup" was to prevent the expected Canadians from taking possession of the Hudson's Bay Company headquarters. However, their behaviour was severely criticized by the Halfbreeds, who judged it "inconstitutionnel", and by the local Canadian minority (Siggins 109; Riel I, 25). The Red River Canadians, who instead of feeling threatened by Canada's imminent

acquisition of the Settlement actively promoted it, were particularly strident in their protestations. Under the general leadership of John Christian Schultz, a medical doctor with close links to the expansionist Canada First Party, they began to plot to recapture Fort Garry. But Riel learned of their plans and had his forces arrest all those involved (Stanley 1936, 48-52, 83-6, 115-7). As the Métis leader would later inform the colony's inhabitants, his government would not tolerate any breach of the "sûreté publique" and anyone who dared to do so would be treated "avec toute les sévérités de la loi" (I, 81).

Several of the prisoners soon escaped, though, a political embarrassment that caused Riel much grief and may have precipitated his first severe mental breakdown (Siggins 158). Among the escapees were the aforementioned Mair and Schultz, as well as Tom Scott, an Irish-born Orangeman who had recently migrated West from Ontario. Scott was subsequently arrested again and, upon being tried in a "conseil de guerre" presided over by Lépine, was executed by firing squad--his body mysteriously disappearing<sup>3</sup> (Riel I, 404). Although the Orangeman was the only person killed by his government, Riel is extremely reticent on the subject, usually dismissing it as a simple case of political expediency. In his reputed words to two participants, Scott had to be killed because "we must make Canada respect us" and "I must make an example to impress others and lead them to respect my government" (qtd. in D.A. Smith 40 and Young 135; Braz 1996, 30-1). Or as the Métis leader encapsulates his position some years later, in the context "des troubles du nord'ouest. . . l'exécution de Th. Scott n'est qu'un détail" (I, 362).

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<sup>3</sup> The controversial disposal of Scott's body continues to elicit much commentary. For instance, Alfred Rousseau writes that "*la baie d'Hudson avait payé quatre hommes \$500. chacun pour ligoter le cadavre de Scott de grosses chaînes à billots et pour le plonger la nuit en grand secret dans la rivière. Riel n'y était pour rien. Un de ces hommes avant de mourir a livré ce secret*" (34-5). Manie Tobie, on the other hand, states that four Riel supporters, including her paternal grandfather Elzéar Goulet, "avaient été choisis pour enterrer Thomas Scott. Ils se croisèrent les mains (. . .) sur le lieu de cette inhumation pour ne pas en révéler le secret" (66).

Riel notwithstanding, rather than being a non-issue, Scott's killing would actually become "le grand événement" or "central and defining event of the Red River Resistance", virtually ending it (Frémont 1932, 113; Bumsted 1995, 26). The affair provoked such indignation in Ontario that the government of Prime Minister Macdonald felt compelled to organize a military expedition to ensure its possession of what would soon be named the province of Manitoba. The Métis realized that they had little chance against the better armed Canadian forces and began to disperse, having "abandoned any idea of resistance" by the time that Colonel Garnet Wolseley's troops arrived at Fort Garry in August 1870 (Stanley 1963, 140). Riel himself at first hid in the woods around Saint Boniface, waiting to see if he would be treated with the civility that he thought his position as head of the provisional government and "le droit des gens" merited. However, he soon concluded that Wolseley's "Expédition de paix" had entered the Settlement "comme un ennemi" (I, 236). Believing that Canadian "assassins" were plotting to murder him--Riel's suspicions were partly confirmed the following year when the Ontario Liberal leader, Edward Blake, offered a "\$5,000" reward for his capture--he fled to the United States and to a new life as an international fugitive (I, 101-2; Stanley 1936, 167).

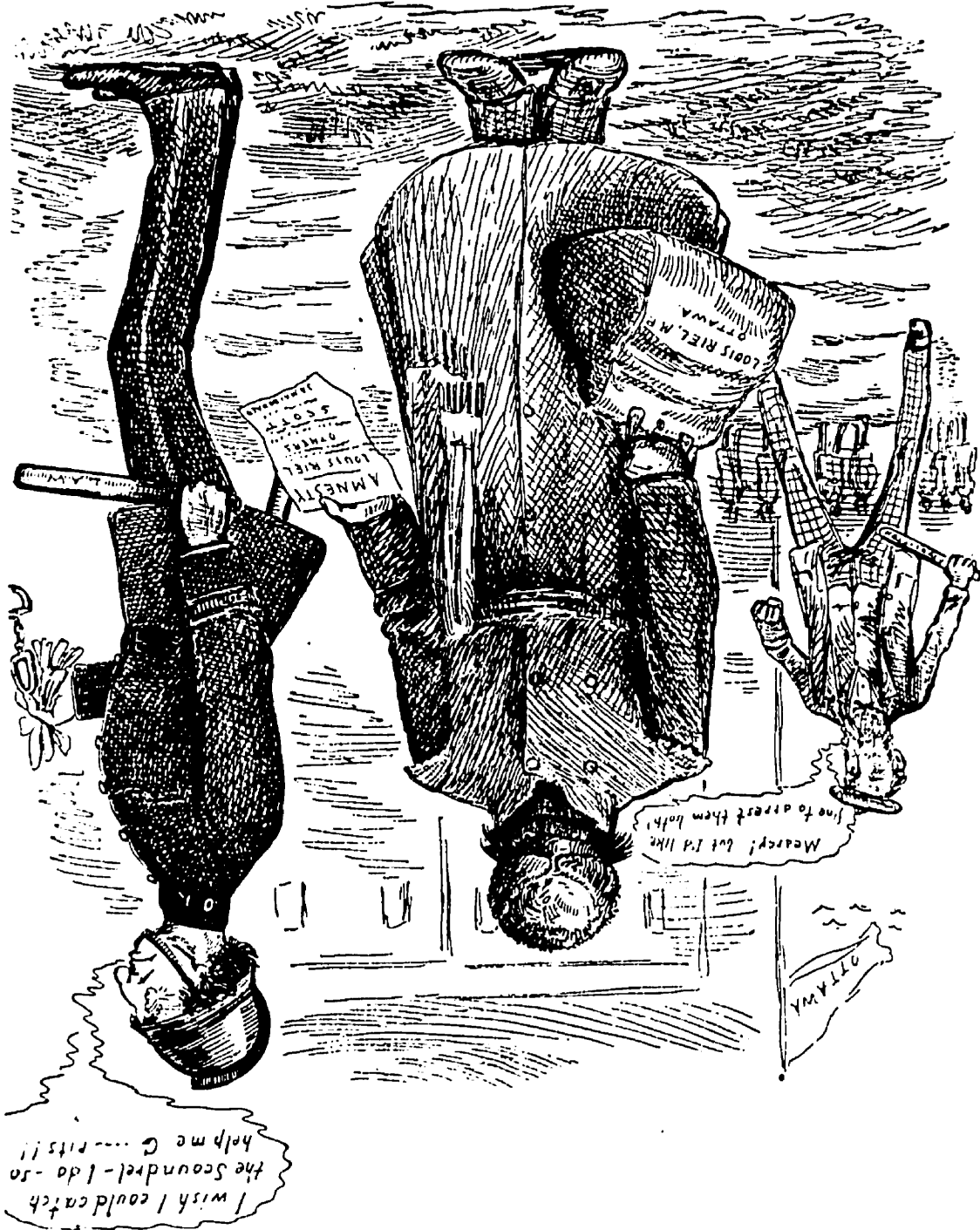
Ironically, Riel's status as an outlaw would not prevent him from initiating one of the most unlikely careers in Canadian federal politics. While living on the run, he easily won the Conservative Party's nomination for the new Manitoba riding of Provencher. Then when Sir George-Étienne Cartier was unexpectedly defeated in his Quebec riding--the Eastern election took place weeks before the Western one--he was approached through Bishop Taché to resign his candidacy in favour of the Prime Minister's francophone lieutenant (III, 260). After demanding that the Métis be allowed "the exercise" of their traditional land rights, Riel assented to be replaced by the 1837-rebel-turned-statesman, someone he had once eulogized as "l'honneur des

Canadiens français” (I, 224, IV, 71) but would subsequently describe both as his “vrai” political ancestor and as a deceitful practitioner of the “politique anglaise” (III, 572; IV, 127). Still, to render the situation even more implausible, not to say farcical, Cartier died soon afterwards and Riel would again contest, and win, the riding. He then travelled surreptitiously to Ottawa and, with the assistance of a former schoolmate and Quebec Member of Parliament, slipped into the House of Commons long enough to take the oath of allegiance and sign “the register as member for Provencher” (Riel II, 419; Stanley 1963, 202).

Already humiliated by Riel’s election, Parliament responded to his audacious appearance in Ottawa by expelling its newest member (Stanley 1963, 203). The fugitive Métis leader somehow had managed to embarrass both parties in the Commons, which reacted in contrasting ways. While the Liberals were calling for Riel’s head, the Tories were doing all they possibly could to keep the “rebel” out of the country. The country’s first Prime Minister is actually alleged to have been channeling money through Bishop Taché to bribe Riel not to return to Canada until the crisis was over, a masterful game of double-speak to which no one has paid better homage than J.W. Bengough, the founder and editor of the influential Toronto satirical magazine *Grip* (D. Morton 1974, 363, 369; Cumming 130-52). In one cartoon, the openly Liberal Bengough depicts M.P. Riel escaping from Ottawa as “warden” Macdonald conveniently looks the other way. In the background, the Liberal leader Alexander Mackenzie declares that he would like to arrest the two supposed adversaries (Fig. 1). In another cartoon, Macdonald and Mackenzie, both armed with swords, stand around Riel’s vacant M.P.’s chair, which is covered with spikes. In spite of their partisan differences, for once the two federal leaders agree that “LOUIS RIEL IS A MURDERER AND AN OUTLAW AND HE OUGHT TO BE HANGED” (Fig. 2). Still in a later cartoon, after the fall of Batoche, Bengough responds to the suggestion that a memorial to Riel be erected at

Fig. 1. "A Case of Riel Distress!"

A CASE OF RIEL DISTRESS!



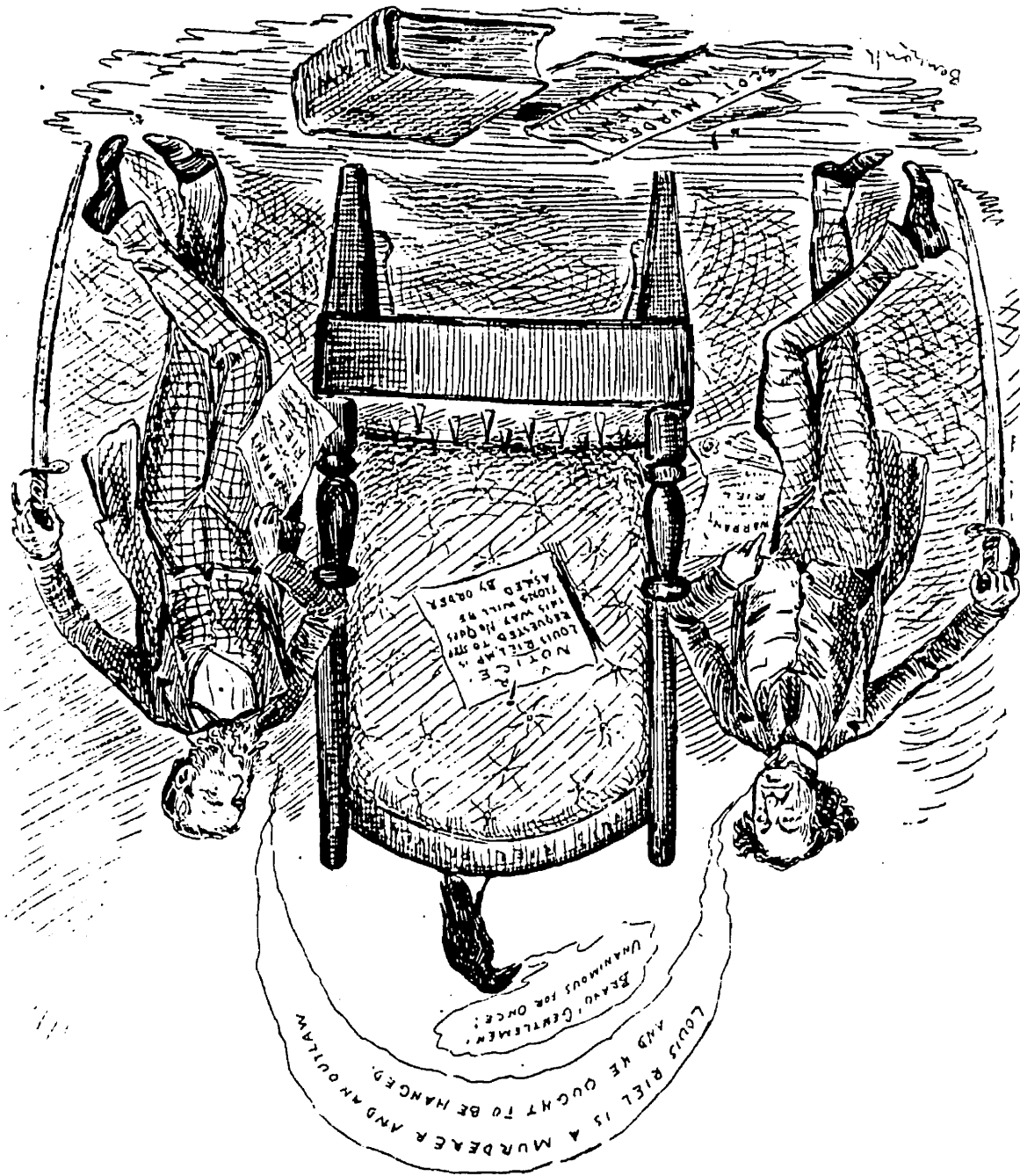


Fig. 2. "The Vacant Chair: A Riel Bond of Union."



COMBINATION STATUE IN BRASS OF RIEL AND  
SIR JOHN.

Fig. 3. "Combination Statue in Brass of Riel and Sir John."

Toronto's Queen's Park by sketching a "combination" statue of Riel and Macdonald. The Prime Minister's half shows the moccasin-clad Prime Minister holding a note about a "\$1500" payment to Riel. On the base of the monument is inscribed, "1872, Would to God I could catch him!" and "1886, Would to God I had not caught him!" (Fig. 3).

The awkward political situation created by Riel's election finally seemed to be resolved in 1875, when Parliament granted the Métis leader amnesty for his role at Red River presumably including the execution of Tom Scott, "conditional on five years' banishment from Her Majesty's Dominions" (qtd. in Stanley 1936, 174). Riel's exile from Canada, however, would neither silence him nor sever his political and emotional ties to his cause. On the contrary, his Métis nationalism grew ever stronger after he was forced to move away from his people and land. As he writes to his mother, "Pendant les cinq années que je passerai dans l'exil, je n'ai que cela à faire, et à dire aux Métis: rester Métis, devenir plus Métis que jamais!" (I, 467). This is particularly true after December 8 of that year, when he experienced what would be unquestionably the pivotal event in his life. Riel was attending Catholic Mass at Saint Patrick's Church in Washington, D.C.:

Au moment même où le prêtre, ayant terminé son sermon, disait le *Credo*, et pendant que le peuple était debout et moi avec lui, je sentis soudain dans mon coeur une joie si maîtresse de moi, que pour cacher à mes voisins le rire de mon visage, je fus contraint d'étendre mon mouchoir à sa grandeur et de le tenir ainsi avec ma main sur ma bouche et sur mes joues. . . .

Après que ces consolations m'eussent réjoui environ deux minutes, je fus immédiatement saisi par une immense douleur d'âme. Et si ce n'eut été des grands efforts que j'ai faits pour contenir mes sanglots, mes cris et mes larmes eussent éclaté terriblement dans l'enceinte de l'église. C'est par discrétion que j'ai fait taire

la douleur presque insupportable que j'éprouvais dans mon âme. Or cette grande peine qui avait été égale à ma joie, passa en aussi peu de temps qu'elle. Et mon esprit resta plein de cette pensée: "Les joies et les douleurs de l'homme ici-bas sont courtes."

Pas longtemps après, à la suite seulement de quelques jours, on commença à me traiter de fou. (II, 163-4)

It was that fateful winter in the capital of the United States, Riel would assert later--writing in the third person--that "God anointed him. . . prophet of the new world" (III, 261).

Needless to say, Riel's Washington revelation raises some serious questions. As he notes above, it is often perceived as a sign of his faltering mental health. Actually, in a case fraught with political overtones, his "bons et. . . nombreux amis" would soon afterwards spirit the exile to Quebec and have him institutionalized in psychiatric hospitals for the next two years, in order to protect him from his Orange "enemies" as well as from himself (Mousseau 90; H. Howard 644). Perhaps even more critical from a textual perspective, Riel assumes the authenticity of whatever transpired at Saint Patrick's Church, not based on what God purportedly imparted to him, but rather based on a previous letter by Montreal's ultramontane Bishop Ignace Bourget. Dated July 14, 1875, Bishop Bourget's text would become for Riel "le livre de ma guidance" and the irrefutable proof of his messianic destiny. Yet all that the letter states is that "Dieu qui vous a toujours dirigé et assisté. . . vous a donné une mission qu'il vous faudra accomplir en tous points" (Riel II, 35, Bourget 437). Moreover, Bourget himself would subsequently inform Riel that the latter had "mal interprété" his words and that no heavenly significance should be attached to them (Riel II, 315-20).

In any case, whether divinely sanctioned or self-willed, the inescapable fact is that Riel's

vision completely transformed his image of himself. After December 8, 1875, he is no longer a failed political leader driven into exile by a rapacious foreign power. Instead, he is “le Prophète, le Pontife Infaillible, le Prêtre Roi”, the David of the New World--starting in May 1876, he would usually sign his name “Louis ‘David’ Riel” (II, 73, 75; Flanagan 1979). Claiming to be “plus grand que Samson”, Riel is not just the Pope but the Catholic Church itself: “Je me reconnais, ô mon Dieu, je suis votre épouse, la sainte église des Elus” (IV, 143, III, 374). As he writes in an untitled poem (1876-7):

Quand je vous parle, c’est la voix de Dieu qui sonne

Et tout ce que je dis vous est essentiel.

Je suis le joyeux téléphone

Qui vous transmet les chants et les discours du ciel.

Je fais communiquer d’une manière insigne

Le Séminaire avec la maison de la Vigne,

Quelqu’un chante d’en haut: et j’en suis le témoin:

Que vous êtes si proche et cependant si loin. (IV, 146)

Or as he concludes, he is the intermediary between God and humanity, “le téléphone/ Du Très Saint-Esprit” that speaks not in his own name but “au nom de Dieu qui condamne et pardonne” (IV, 146).

Furthermore, it is not just Riel’s self-image that undergoes a metamorphosis as a result of his Washington epiphany. With the Prophet of the New World also rises a new people, the Métis. In a prescient letter written to Bishop Bourget on the eve of the revelation, in which Riel seems to anticipate the blissful event by declaring that “j’accepte avec le plus grand bonheur la mission que vous m’annoncez”, he expresses the desire that the Pope be informed that “un nouveau peuple

catholique surgit dans le monde en ce temps-ci: le peuple Métis” (I, 474-5). One of the reasons he wishes that the Pontiff be made aware of the development is that the Pope is the “Protecteur naturel du Peuple Métis.” Riel evidently comes to embrace the idea that the Métis are a chosen people, favoured not only by the “Christ visible de l’Eglise militante”, “le Roi des Rois”, but also by the transcendent Christ of the Church Triumphant. In the words he addresses to God, the Métis are “la nation que vous avez choisie pour annoncer aux hommes votre seconde venue” (I, 475-6; II, 83).

Riel’s belief in the providential role of the Métis has a strong genealogical and religious foundation, his conviction that he and his people are the new Israelites, since “les sauvages de l’Amérique du Nord sont Juifs et du plus pur sang d’Abraham, à l’exception des esquimaux qui viennent du Maroc” (II, 39). Yet this belief, which was not uncommon in the nineteenth century and has some currency even today (Chamberlin 14), is not devoid of political implications. At least from the time of the Guernon affair, Riel begins to perceive the Métis as a separate ethnopolitical entity. The challenge for him then is not so much to prove that his nation exists as to demonstrate that it has a legitimate claim to the North-West, a “droit” he initially concludes it possesses through its “sang sauvage”. In his revelations, however, he takes quite a dissimilar approach, deriving his national rights not from his ancestral inheritance but from natural law. As he writes, “Dieu est le Père des nations et des tribus. Il ne peut les créer sans les localiser” (I, 292, III, 274). In other words, by virtue of its existence alone, a people has a divine right to a territory of its own, a homeland. This is a concept that becomes central to Riel’s vision and that he develops more fully in his later writings, notably in his testimony at his treason trial.

In 1878, two years after being taken secretly to Quebec for psychiatric treatment, Riel was again smuggled across the border. This time he travelled in the opposite direction, back into the

United States, as his hosts apparently feared the political repercussions of having sheltered him “illegally” for such a long period (Siggins 271). Riel would do some farming in a francophone area in northeastern New York, while travelling occasionally across the state and throughout New England, but before long he started to entertain the idea of returning West. At first he expressed the intention of acquiring a homestead in Nebraska, reportedly attracted by its “tempéré” and “doux” climate (II, 174, 184). However, late in 1879 he decided to relocate not to Nebraska but to Montana, a choice likely less motivated by the weather than by the fact that the territory had a sizable Métis population.

Riel’s Montana life, at least outwardly, was remarkably uneventful. He eventually married a local Métis woman named Marguerite Monet *dit* Bellehumeur, with whom he would have two children, and settled down as a school teacher in a Jesuit Métis mission. Particularly after taking United States citizenship, a “delight[ful]” occurrence that he felt had “effacé la ligne entre le N.O. et les Etats-Unis” (qtd. in Botkin 19; Riel III, 307), Riel became deeply involved in Montana politics on behalf of the Métis. In an attempt to better support his family, he even began writing verse in English, offering to use his pen to sell anything from mineral resources, to political parties, and tourism:

I can sing in my poetry  
 Right and wealth. I can advertize  
 Your trade. I can sing the country  
 And every great enterprise.

My poems can show the big trains  
 Run by Northern Pacific

Over Hills and through rowling plains:

I can celebrate their trafic.

My pen can invite emigrants

To come and buy along the line

Acres of those beautiful grants

Where a land is worth a rich mine.

I can sing our gentle ladies

Innocent girls and good young boys

And that pure love which remedies

To sorrows and makes us rejoice. (IV, 279)

Unfortunately for Riel, neither his political nor his poetic endeavours met with much success. So he again began to doubt himself, convinced that he was a total failure. As he confides in one of his notebooks, “Que suis-je? Que suis-je pour essayer à mener les événements? Un néant, c’est moi” (II, 355).

Riel’s political fortunes would soon change dramatically, though, with the arrival of the celebrated buffalo hunter Gabriel Dumont and three other Saskatchewan Valley Métis. Sent by both the white and mixed-race residents of the region, which was beset by a series of economic and political problems, the visitors had travelled over 1,000 kilometres on horseback to ask the former leader of the Red River Resistance to help them prepare a list of grievances to present to the Canadian government (Stanley 1963, 265-8). Riel immediately grasped the potential significance of “gabriel/ the messenger” journeying to Montana with his colleagues to bring back

“david/ the prophet” (Morrissey 1989, 23), noting that “your coming to me has the proportions of a remarkable fact. I record it as one of the gratifications of my life” (III, 4). Although he pondered the invitation for some time, there was never much doubt what his answer would be. Within a few days, on June 10, 1884, Riel headed north toward the Métis village of Batoche, a historic trek that would culminate in “the final brave and desperate attempt to assert a kind of native sovereignty in Canada” (Chamberlin 200) and his own hanging.

As mentioned, the stated object of the Dumont delegation was merely to request Riel’s “advice on various difficulties which have rendered the British North West as yet unhappy under the Ottawa Government” (Riel III, 4). Yet even the prospect of such a relatively inconsequential role before long started to transform his sense of self, making him wonder if it did not augur more grandiose events ahead. As he writes to members of his family still living in Manitoba:

Il n’y a pas longtemps, j’étais humble maître d’école sur les bords éloignés du Missouri. Et me voici aujourd’hui au rang des hommes publics les plus populaires de la Saskatchewan. L’an dernier personne ne voulait de moi dans les cercles politiques influents du Manitoba, cette année le peuple s’émeut à ma parole dans le coeur du Nord Ouest. Les banquiers m’invitent à leur table. Et leur bienveillance leur fait battre des mains, en signe d’approbation. Ils m’applaudissent avec la foule. Et le mauvais riche qui me regardait l’an passé avec un air de pitié, s’inquiète à présent. Il ouvre les yeux dans son étonnement; il est alarmé; il se fâche. Qui est-ce qui fait arriver tout cela? (III, 12)

He answers his own question by saying that “c’est Dieu” and then adds, underlining his words for emphasis, “*Le Seigneur a fait pour moi de grandes choses*” (III, 12).

Riel appears to have become convinced that his call to Batoche was part of God’s larger

providential plan for him. He was not just to counsel the residents of the North-West on federal-territorial relations but to reveal himself as the “second David” who would redress all the wrongs done to his suffering nation and “lead my people, Israel, out of tyranny” (qtd. in Schultz 382 and Banks 256). Ottawa’s unresponsiveness to his petitions, in particular, led Riel to conclude that “[j]ustice commands [us] to take arms” and that “a war of extermination” should be waged “upon all those who have shown themselves hostile to our rights” (III, 54, 56). Yet his struggle was as much religious as political, since the people of the North-West had to fight Canada as well as “Rome.” For instance, after the majority of white settlers and Halfbreeds refused to heed his call to arms against the Canadian government, he persuaded his largely francophone followers to form a new council called the *Exovedate*, meaning that everyone is “equal” like the members of a flock (Riel III, 70-1; qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 322; Flanagan 1983, 8). The council soon proceeded to arrest those individuals who did not support its policies, including Riel’s cousin Charles Nolin, a prominent but controversial leader at both Red River and Batoche whose ambiguous activities have given rise to the suspicion that he was a Métis Judas (H. Adams 1995, 91-7; Payment 110). Interestingly, while his community began to turn on itself, Riel appeared less concerned with military or political matters than with spiritual ones. Instead of devising a strategy to win over his local opponents or to forestall the coming Canadian forces, he contemplated the transfer of a revitalized Catholic Church to the New World. According to Riel, fashionable secular ideas threatened to turn Rome into a “ville d’ateliers et de boutiques.” The only way that the Church could save itself was by relocating to the Americas, with the new Holy See in his hometown of Saint Boniface. The new Pope too would hail from the New World. He would be none other than Riel’s mentor Bishop Taché, replacing the now deceased Bishop Bourget, who was originally scheduled to be the first Pontiff (III, 144-7).

Since Riel was increasingly immersed in religious matters, he entrusted the defence of Batoche to his “parent” Dumont, a man that he claimed had “le génie des opérations militaires” and “connaît le Nord ouest comme le creux de sa main” (III, 119). Under Dumont’s command, the Métis began propitiously, inflicting serious losses on the shocked Canadian forces at nearby Duck Lake. The master buffalo hunter, though, attributed his success not to his own proficiency as a marksman but to the “prières de Riel, qui pendant tout le temps de l’engagement, priait les bras en croix et faisait prier les femmes et les enfants” (134-5). In response to the news of the Métis victory, the Plains Cree chief Poundmaker and his men marched to Battleford, some distance northwest of Batoche. The anxious residents promptly sought refuge in the local Mounted Police barracks and, with the town deserted, that night “a few of the Indians raided several of the abandoned farms and houses”. More ominously, at Frog Lake, Big Bear’s band of Plains and Woods Cree took advantage of their chief’s absence from the community and shot in “cold blood” the village’s “Indian Agent, the Farm Instructor, two priests and five others including a French half-breed” (Stanley 1936, 335, 339). Members of the two groups then advanced toward Fort Pitt and “peremptorily demanded” that Inspector Francis Dickens and the Mounted Police surrender to them. The English novelist’s son at first resisted but eventually capitulated and, upon taking several civilians hostage, “the Indians” not only plundered the fort but then “set fire to it” (Stanley 1936, 341, 343).

With the so-called Frog Lake Massacre and the attacks at Battleford and, especially, Fort Pitt, “which finally destroyed any lingering doubts as to the invincibility of the white men” (Stanley 1936, 343), Riel’s hopes of a Métis-First Nations alliance against Canada seemed about to be realized. However, no other First Nations would elect to clash directly with the Canadian forces and help the Métis and their leader end “our difficulties. . . in an American 4<sup>th</sup> July”, a

failure that was due to a series of both personal and cultural factors (Riel III, 76; Dempsey 1972, 119-20; 1984, 92-4). For instance, while the politician-mystic was expecting Poundmaker to join the Métis at Batoche, Poundmaker was counting on Riel to support him at Battleford, “as we are unable to take the fort without help” (qtd. in Stanley 1936, 365). On the other hand, the primary reason that the Plains Cree chief Big Bear chose not to support Riel was that he mistrusted not just the Métis leader but his people. Even though the Métis tended to be largely the product of Cree and Caucasian intermarriages, often being described as “the Cree mixed-bloods”, Big Bear considered them “interlopers” who were “living off Cree buffalo” (Dempsey 1972, 55, 124; 1984, 53). He was also deeply resentful of what one might call Métis chauvinism, the fact that, instead of adopting the time-honoured ways of their First Nations ancestors, the Métis demanded that the Cree respect their customs. This was particularly true of the buffalo hunt, which the Métis conducted “in their own fashion, travelling in large companies and using a militaristic type of organization that went beyond the Cree idea of co-operative hunting.” Indeed, a buffalo hunt under Dumont’s command appears to have provoked much of Big Bear’s antagonism toward the Métis. When Big Bear refused to hunt according to Métis rules, Dumont publicly humiliated the Cree chief, a “bitter experience for Big Bear” which “created a rift that never healed” (Dempsey 1984, 53-5).

Riel was even less successful with Crowfoot and Red Crow. The Blackfoot and Blood chiefs, whose peoples controlled the strategic area along what is now the Alberta-Montana border, were quite partial to any group that vowed to take “possession of the North-West” and return it to its first inhabitants. Yet, in spite of extensive pressure by their younger warriors, ultimately neither Crowfoot nor Red Crow deemed it wise to show solidarity with Riel. This was a turn of events that is explained not only by their skepticism about the “self-appointed savior” but

also by the fact that the two chiefs tended to perceive the Métis as an extension of the Cree, their “age-old” enemy (Dempsey 1972, 120-1, 170; 1984, 11). Thus, without general support from the First Nations, the Métis were no match for the more numerous and better-armed Canadian police-militia contingent, which had been reinforced by the enigmatic U.S. lieutenant Arthur Howard and his “patent murdering machine”, the state-of-the-art Gatling gun that produced “that ‘music by Handle’/ That lulled Riel’s ‘breeds’ to rest” (Mulvaney 1886a, 245; Anonymous 2). Actually, by May 1885, a mere two months after it had started, the North-West Rebellion was over. Dumont, the consummate guerrilla fighter and “natural man par excellence”, would flee to the United States. The more introspective Riel, though, would neither flee nor be captured but rather would surrender to the victors (Woodcock 1975, 11; Riel III, 93; Middleton 56).

Excluding his sanctioning of the execution of Tom Scott, Riel’s actions during what he termed “our bold but just [Saskatchewan] uprising” constitute the most controversial aspect of his life (III, 59). According to the usually laudatory Dumont, Riel was responsible for the military defeat at Batoche by forbidding his commander to “aller devant les troupes et de les harceler pendant la nuit,” a guerrilla tactic that the politician-mystic considered “trop sauvage”. Likewise, the anarchist thinker and Dumont biographer George Woodcock asserts that Riel “developed desperate policies that could succeed only by means of violence, and yet he shrank from violence when it came” (Dumont 127; Woodcock 1975, 13). The Métis Marxist historian Howard Adams goes further, claiming that the reason the Métis “lost both the 1870 and 1885 wars of national liberation” was that “our supposed hero” did not act as “a revolutionary” but as “a pacifist and a negotiator.” To quote Adams, “If Riel had not been at Batoche, the Metis and the Indians may have had a much better chance of winning their liberation battle, and may have maintained control of their territory and established a nation” (1995, 119). Even the more sympathetic Margaret

Laurence, a fiction writer in whose work the Métis occupy a central role, is rather critical of Riel. Laurence maintains that the Métis “could not have held out indefinitely” against the mightier Canadian forces. At the same time she feels that there are “degrees of failure” and that, under a strategy other than Riel’s, the Métis might at least “have achieved. . . bargaining power” (1965, 229).

Riel attempted to justify his behaviour at his trial, but he did so in a way that was quite revealing of his state of mind. To begin with, he contended that the Métis did not initiate the “agitation” in the Saskatchewan Valley but simply responded to attacks by Canada. He also claimed that the North-West Rebellion was really a “continuation” of the Red River Resistance of 1869-70. To Riel this was made evident by the fact of the earlier conflict being called “the troubles of the North-West, and the troubles of 1885 being still [known as] the troubles of the North-West” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 317, 352). Indeed, he suggested that the Saskatchewan clash was rendered inevitable by Ottawa’s refusal to accept what one might call the “natural” sovereignty of nations. In his words to the court:

Do you own the lands? . . . Who starts the nations? The very one who creates them, God. God is the master of the universe, our planet is his land, and the nation and the tribes are members of His family, and as a good father, he gives a portion of the lands to that nation, to that tribe, to everyone, that is his heritage, that is his share of the inheritance, of the people, or nation or tribe. (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 358)

That is, even when a nation outgrows its land-base, it never has the right to displace any other nation by dispossessing it of its divinely-granted territory. As Riel concluded, “you cannot exist without having that spot of land. This is the principle[:] God cannot create a tribe without locating it. We are not birds” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 358).

During the trial, Riel also kept insisting that “I believe that I have a mission” and that “I am naturally inclined to think of God at the beginning of my actions” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 314, 311). While he did not specify the precise nature of his calling, except to say that it would bring about “the triumph of religion in the world,” it is evident that he was convinced he was favoured by “a spirit who guides and assists me and consoles me” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 315, 320). But since he felt that people would only believe that he had been “blessed by God” if they were convinced he was sane, he almost welcomed the prospect of being condemned to death by the court, which would prove to the world that his mind was not unbalanced, and “I cannot fulfil my mission as long as I am looked upon as an insane being” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 315, 351). In light of Riel’s religious beliefs, it is thus not difficult to understand why he would not concern himself unduly with military matters during the Saskatchewan campaign. After all, no matter how militarily inferior the Métis might have been, they were bound to emerge victorious, for God would assure his chosen people’s final triumph. To quote one of Riel’s early fables, “Le ciel a toujours son tour” (IV, 36).

Another significant point Riel made at his trial was that he decided to travel to Batoche in 1884 because the “North-West is. . . my mother, it is my mother country” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 312). As we have seen, this is not quite the case in his early writings; and it is not always true even in his later work. Riel’s identification with Quebec certainly evolved considerably over the years, from his seeing the Eastern society as his motherland in the Collège de Montréal period, through the “Mère Colonie” of “O Québec,” to a “sister colony” at his trial (IV, 95; qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 359). Moreover, as late as July 1885, while incarcerated in the Regina prison, he can still refer to France as “ma mère”, suggesting that he had at least another collective mother, a caring European parent who “s’intéresse à mon sort/ En protégeant ma vie auprès de

l'Angleterre.” Indeed, the Prophet of the New World considered himself to be not just a child of France but a royal pretender to its throne, since “par sa mère Julie de la Gimodière [il] est un des princes descendants de Louis XI” (IV, 429; III, 209).

The question of Riel's national affiliation actually remained unresolved to the day he died, which was perhaps inevitable considering his rather ambivalent attitude toward his First Nations ancestors. As stressed throughout this chapter, Riel derived the Métis' title to the North-West from their “droit d'indien”. Yet, especially in his early writings, he tended to treat First Nations as if they were an amorphous mass, describing them generically in the dominant discourse of the time as the “nations sauvages” or just “les sauvages” (I, 290, 65; III, 65). It is true that, after Riel moved to Montana, he did become more aware of the national specificity of First Nations, referring to them as Tetons, Sioux, Blackfoot, and so on (II, 212-18). Still, even toward the end of his life, he was not above boasting about the numerous defeats that the Métis have inflicted on numerous First Nations. As he writes in his ode to “Le peuple Métis-Canadien-français” (1883):

J'aime sans mesure et j'admire

Les Métis-canadiens-français:

Ce peuple nouveau qui se mire

Déjà dans de brillants succès.

Il a fait connaître sa gloire

Aux indiens du Minnesota.

Il a toujours gagné victoire

Sur les tribus du Dakota. (IV, 319)

Or as he states elsewhere, “Avant la Confédération les Métis, par leur supériorité sur les tribus

indiennes les dominaient”; and, “Les métis sont les hommes qui domptèrent ces nations sauvages par leurs armes” (III, 281, 284).

Riel’s contradictory feelings about the First Nations are inextricably linked to his concept of métissage, an idea central to an understanding of his thought and identity and which exposes his general pessimism about the future prospects of the First Nations. For example, he developed a master plan to divide the North-West into several parts in order to create a new Bavaria, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Poland, and Sweden. He even expressed the desire to build a “nouvelle Judée” for those “Juifs qui consentiraient à reconnaître Jésus-Christ pour l’Unique Messie” (III, 312-3, 148; D. Morton 1974, 355-6). However, Riel did not allocate any section of those lands either to a specific First Nation or to all First Nations, since he believed that they were destined to disappear into the European-First Nations melting pot or “métissage global” that would characterize the northern half of the continent. To quote him, “toute la race sauvage de l’Amérique du Nord ferait place à une race nouvelle la race métisse” (G. Martel 1978, 130; Riel II, 409).

Jan Vansina has written that “[c]ulture can be defined as what is common in the minds of a given group” and that “[e]very culture has its imagery, collectively held and understood by all” (124, 137). If this is the case, which seems problematic given that even the most homogeneous of nations are believed to have a multiplicity of “lieux” or “nœuds de mémoire” (Nora xii), then the only culture or nation to which Riel could ever have belonged was the French-speaking, Catholic Red River Métis, what he calls the “nation manitobaine/ Des Métis-canadiens-français.”<sup>4</sup> The Red

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<sup>4</sup> Even Riel’s cultural oneness with the Franco-Catholic Métis is complicated by the fact that he did not share his community’s dominant First Nations ancestry. While most *métis* descended from the Angolkian Cree and Salteaux, Riel’s paternal grandmother was Chipewyan, a branch of the Athapaskan-speaking Dene Nation (Champagne 154-5).

River *métis*, that “branche de l’arbre Canadien français.”, are certainly the only “national” group with which he consistently identified throughout his life (IV, 325; I, 368). Yet, at least following his return from Montreal in 1868, Riel also developed close affinities with the Settlement’s other mixed-race community, the Anglo-Protestant Halfbreeds. In fact, in his writings, he never questions the latter’s title to the North-West and his main concern during the Red River Troubles is to avert a “horrible civil war” between the two hybrid groups that he envisages will form the core of “une puissante nationalité dans le Manitoba et le Nord Ouest” (I, 54; II, 120).

As might have been surmised, Riel’s pan-Métisism is not without its complications. After all, it is articulated by someone who at different times claims not only that the French language is a “moyen d’union morale très forte” and Catholicism “la seule foi vraie une” but also that “Jésus Christ Notre Dieu défend à toute personne protestante de rechercher la main d’aucune personne catholique, avant de se convertir et d’embrasser la religion catholique, apostolique et Vitale des Montagnes Lumineuses” (I, 390; III, 258; II, 152). Still, Riel’s need to accommodate his larger community’s linguistic and religious duality leads him to endorse a form of Christian ecumenism for all “dénominations religieuses du Nouveau Monde”, which he feels “ont besoin d’être reliées ensemble, d’une manière étroite.” Furthermore, this universalism is not just religious and cultural but also racial, since the Métis of the future are destined to become a transracial nationality, superceding both their European and their First Nations forerunners. As Riel explains, “Le nom métis serait agréable à tout le monde, parce qu’il n’est pas exclusif” and thus has “l’avantage de mentionner d’une manière convenable, le contingent pour lequel chaque nation contribuerait à fonder le peuple nouveau” (II, 231, 120).

Even with the two traditional mixed-blood groups fused into one, though, Riel realizes that the Métis remain vulnerable. Consequently, he contemplates forging a series of alliances with

other societies, from Quebec and the Québécois diaspora in the United States, through France and several other European countries, to the United States itself. For Riel, the republic to the south is a friend and protector of the Métis as well as their mentor, the nation from which all the future mixed-race societies of the North-West will learn “l’art de gouverner”. He is especially grateful to the U.S. Republican Party, which he says “saved Manitoba in 69” (II, 410, 307). Riel’s relationship with the United States, however, is extremely ambivalent. For example, the main reason he feels that “la race Anglo-Saxone des Etats-Unis” should support the mass emigration of its non-British citizens to Canada is that such a development would enable it to remain “d’autant plus homogène” and to preserve “les qualités de son caractère d’autant plus intactes” (III, 312-3). Riel also maintains that the United States discriminates against its French-Canadian citizens, who “n’ont pas dans les emplois publics la quote-part qu’ils ont droit d’avoir”. Actually, just before Dumont and his companions arrive in Montana in 1884, Riel fervently prays to God: “Délivrez-moi des Etats”, a country which is “un enfer pour l’honnête homme” (III, 380, II, 357; III, 404). Yet, after the fall of Batoche, he, as an “american citizen,” would write to the U.S. President Grover Cleveland not just to come to the assistance of the Métis but to annex “the Northwest to the great american republic”, to “blot out” the “international line between the United States and the Northwest. . . from lake Superior to the Pacific ocean” (III, 187).

Curiously, in light of his emergence as the most popular figure in Canadian history and a “Canadian true” (Hope vii; Swainson 1979, 85), the one country with which Riel never seems to consider making an alliance is Canada. On the contrary, as his political career attests, he does everything possible to avoid any links with what he usually calls “la Puissance”. For Riel, Canada is not merely “a foreign power and. . . a foreign jurisdiction” but the mortal enemy of the Métis people, “notre injuste agresseur” (I, 173, 111, 416). Confederation itself is “une fraude immense,

une tyrannie colossale” whose “génie” is nothing less than to “nous détruire” (III, 299; IV, 118). Therefore, rather than desiring to become part of the Canadian experiment, he strives to shelter himself, and his people, from the evil predator who “usurped the title of the aboriginal Half breeds to the soil.” Or, as Riel states regarding Red River, “c’est le droit d’une colonie de ne pas être forcée à entrer dans la confédération” (III, 60; I, 106).

The extent to which Riel does not associate his individual and collective dreams with Canada is strikingly evident at his trial. During the proceedings, he frequently draws attention to his U.S. citizenship, which he claims makes him “simply a guest of this country--a guest of the half-breeds of the Saskatchewan”. Even more telling, Riel refers to his cross examiners not as Canadians but as “British”, a sentiment fully reciprocated by one of his own lawyers, who describes the Métis leader as “an alien in race and an alien in religion” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 324, 315, 310). Needless to say, as we shall see in the following chapters, Riel’s conspicuous lack of identification with Canada has not precluded contemporary Canadian writers from celebrating him as a Canadian hero, as it did not hinder earlier ones from condemning him as a traitor.

## Chapter II

### The Traitor: Riel as an Enemy of Confederation

We'll hang Riel up the Red River,  
And he'll roast in hell forever,  
We'll hang him up the River  
With a yah-yah-yah.

E.J. Pratt (1952)

Riel's impact on the Canadian consciousness was almost instantaneous. Actually, the first work on the Métis leader, depicting him as an enemy of Confederation, appeared the very winter he actively entered the political scene. In February 1870, a retired Hudson's Bay Company officer named Alexander Hunter Murray responded to the Métis seizure of Fort Garry by writing a martial ballad threatening to recapture Red River's economic and administrative centre. In the two-verse "The Marching Song" (1870b), based on the Scottish air "Johnny Cope," Murray vows that Riel, "Wi' his stolen silver forks an' his stolen silver plate," will "not breakfast alone" again in his plush chamber because "we'll take the fort this morning" (50). Later that year the author would add several stanzas to his work and rename it "Capture of Fort Garry, or Riel's Retreat" (1870a), and further lambaste the Métis and their "President elate" for being not just rebels but also cowards. To quote Murray, the moment Riel and his supporters sensed that the Canadian

soldiers were approaching the Settlement, they sank “intae the groun’, or vanished i’ the air/ Like Macbeth’s weird sisters” (58-9).

Also that year, J.C. Major published a considerably longer poem on the subject entitled *The Red River Expedition* (1870). An odd mixture of Anglo-Canadian nationalism and British imperialism, Major’s work is a eulogy for those heroic “[s]ons of Canada’s rich fraught land” and “Albion’s distant sons” who defied the Canadian Shield in order to “avenge a murder’d martyr’s fall” (3-4, 14). Curiously, the focus is not on the volunteers’ clash with Riel and the Métis but on their epic confrontation with nature. As the poet notes as the expeditionary force approaches another portage:

To carry flour, beans and pork  
Is tiresome and heavy work,  
Cartridge and armchests, boats and tents,  
Give rise to many arguments,  
But what’s the use of grumbling o’er,  
What we have never done before?  
So buckle to it as we may,  
And leave old time to clear the way. . . . (17)

Indeed, Major is so captivated by the travails faced by the soldiers that he does not even deign to name the misguided individual whose opposition to Confederation ultimately proves that “God’s blessing [is] on our nation’s arms, and on our noble/ Queen” and that those who fight “beneath the Crimson flag” belong to “God’s avenging side” (28).

By contrast, the Métis leader is very much present in a poem written not long after, “The Ballad of Monsieur Riel” (1873), as is evident from its opening stanzas:

There once was a Frenchman called RIEL,  
 Who troubled the land a good deal,  
     For he rallied his boys,  
     And kicked up a great noise,  
 And trampled the law under heel.

In the midst of the riot so hot,  
 Rose a patriot by name THOMAS SCOTT;  
     Who, refusing to kneel  
     To Le President RIEL,  
 Was tied to a pillar, and shot. (Anonymous 1)

Although composed anonymously, “The Ballad of Monsieur Riel” was first published in *Grip* and its gentle, anti-Tory satire suggests that it is the work of the humour magazine’s editor. The poem certainly ends on a characteristic Bengough note. After Riel escapes to the United States, “the land thirsted still for his gore,” and Prime Minister Macdonald and his cabinet duly promise the country to do their utmost to capture the fugitive. Yet when they locate “the bold and red-handed outlaw,” instead of having him arrested, they decide that he should join the government’s ranks in “the Commons at brave Ottawa” (Anonymous 1).

None of the above poems seems to have left a lasting imprint on either other writers or the public, however, and thus one must trace the beginning of the literature on the traitorous Riel not to them but to J. Edmund Collins’s *The Story of Louis Riel the Rebel Chief* (1885). An instant-novel written while the Saskatchewan campaign raged, Collins’s novel possesses little aesthetic merit (McCourt 1949, 14-6). The author himself subsequently declared that the reason he did not

attach his name to the text was that he was “unwilling to take responsibility for the literary slovenliness” (1886, 143). Yet, notwithstanding its myriad shortcomings, the work is pivotal in the evolution of Riel’s image in Canadian culture. Born and raised in (pre-Confederation) Newfoundland, Collins became a fervent Canadian nationalist soon after immigrating to Canada in 1874, at the age of nineteen. While working on newspapers first in New Brunswick and then in Ontario, he embraced the national optimism that reigned in part of the country’s nascent literary community, even writing “the first significant study of the Macdonald era” (J. Adams 5-7, 9; Collins 1883). Collins became particularly close to the “Confederation” poets Archibald Lampman and Charles G.D. Roberts, the first who considered him “almost the literary father” of a new generation of writers and the second who would continue to communicate with him even after the Newfoundlander’s death--through a Ouija board (Lampman 40; Pomeroy 85). In fact, the most notable virtue of Collins’s novel is that it reflects so well the cultural milieu in which the author circulated that it is an excellent barometer of “the mentality of Ontario,” if not of much of English-speaking Canada, during the later Riel years (Lamb 343).

*The Story of Louis Riel* is a rather confused work, both politically and psychologically. For instance, early on Collins depicts the young Riel as being largely motivated by the prejudice he experiences in Montreal. It is in reaction to his schoolmates’ frequent taunting references to the Métis as “savages” that the would-be priest determines “to follow in the footsteps of my father” and become a political leader, in order to avenge all the slights and humiliations he and his people have suffered at the hands of more powerful groups. As he says to “God[,] who made all men, the white man and the savage, I will, if the propitious day ever come, strike in vengeance, and my blow will be with an iron hand, whose one smiting shall wipe out all the injustice and dishonor” (1885, 10-11). Yet, at the same time that Collins implicitly condemns Quebec’s chauvinism, he

draws a blatantly racist picture of Riel. He acknowledges that the Métis leader is “only one-eighth Indian,” a genetic technicality that supposedly makes him not so much a “half-breed” as an “Octoroon”. But the author also suggests that it is Riel’s “small measure of Indian blood”, which can “assert itself in many ways”, that is responsible for his violent and vindictive personality, for his ultimately being the “apostle of insurrection and unrest” (1885, 6, 46, 5).

The focal point of Collins’s novel is the Riel-Scott relationship, a portrait that in spite of its extremely idiosyncratic characterization has been accepted as historically factual (Collins 1886, 142-43; Swainson 1979, 14). Like their historical models, the Red River Métis and the Ontario Orangeman remain implacable enemies. The crucial difference is that the source of their conflict is not religious or political but romantic; both men fall in love with the same woman, a beautiful young Métisse who loves Tennyson, talks to birds, and inadvertently precipitates the Red River troubles of 1869-70. Riel is smitten by the dark-haired Marie before he even sees her. He is out hunting with a friend, soon after returning from Montreal, when he hears the eighteen-year-old singing in the middle of the prairie. Since the future Métis leader, “like Mohammed, El Mahdi, and other great patrons of race and religion,” has a strong will but is “weaker than a shorn Samson” when facing a comely woman, he immediately succumbs to the singer’s charms. He becomes especially infatuated when he overhears the young woman confide to “a lonely thrush” whose mate has flown south that she too is lonely and “[n]obody loves me[,] woos me, cares for me, or sings about me” (1885, 49-50). So overwhelmed is Riel by the “ravishing beauty of the girl” that, as they afterwards walk toward Marie’s home, he forces himself on her and attempts to “kiss her.” However, to his shock “the soft-eyed fawn of the desert” not only refuses his graceless advances but categorically refuses the possibility of any future romantic dalliance between the two, since “your very sight is already hateful” (1885, 51-52).

Despite Marie's confession to the thrush about not having a lover, part of the reason for her antipathy toward Riel is that there is another man in her life, someone she loves deeply and to whom she owes her life. It seems that during the previous flood season, the intrepid young woman went canoeing on the Red River just above a waterfall. When she reached a series of eddies, she started circling them playfully, but then she lost her paddle and began drifting toward "the rending fans" of a nearby mill. A group of Métis men watched her from the riverbank but, cognizant of the risk involved, chose not to intervene. Then a "young white man", paddle in hand, appeared seemingly out of nowhere and, "without a word, leaped into the mad waters." After swimming to Marie and handing her the paddle, he selflessly guided her and her canoe over the fall (1885, 58-9).

The "young white man" turns out to be Tom Scott and, not surprisingly, both Marie and her family become boundlessly grateful to "the heroic stranger" they consider "the benefactor of [us] all" (1885, 59, 55). Riel, on the other hand, develops an instant animosity toward the "manly, sunny-hearted lad" from Ontario. At first, he attempts to minimize Scott's courage, asserting that it is not much of a feat for an accomplished swimmer to go over a waterfall. In an effort to dissociate himself from the Métis men who elected not to come to Marie's assistance, he even denies his own ethnonational affiliation, declaring: "I am not a half-breed" (1885, 56, 59). When all that fails to convince Marie and her family that Scott is unworthy of their trust, Riel starts to insinuate that the Ontarian is "a paid spy" for the Canadian government. Not only that, acting like the national leader he prematurely considers himself to be, he forbids the entire family to have any further contact with the Orangeman, since Red River is the Métis homeland "and any man who opposes its welfare is a traitor and a common enemy." Marie, however, is anything but intimidated by the threats. Upon stating that she is not unaware of the motivation for Riel's

“patriotism and vigilance”, she calls him “a coward, and a snake” and asks her father to advise the visitor to “never enter our doors again” (1885, 64-5).

Marie’s rejection of Riel, and implied preference for Scott, signals the beginning of the open warfare between the two men. After Scott learns through a Métis friend that Riel is plotting to kidnap Marie and her father, under the pretext that they are “both in league with Canadian spies, and enemies of Red River”, he is able to persuade the pair to let him take them to a safe haven on the U.S. side of the border (1885, 76). The Ontarian’s actions further incense his Métis competitor, who remains more determined than ever to possess Marie. As the self-declared “leader of the people and ruler-predestined of all the land”, Riel feels that he has the right to exact revenge on the woman who has spurned his love by making her “ma maîtresse [sic]” and then “cast[ing] her off among the worthless and degraded ones of her sex.” Therefore, the “outwitted tyrant-libertine” orders his men to scour the countryside looking for Marie as well as Scott, the former whom he now brands as “a spy. . . leagued with our most deadly enemies to thwart our cause.” The soldiers are never able to seize Marie, who remains beyond their reach on foreign soil, but they have considerably more success with Scott, capturing him not once but twice (1885, 68, 88).

The first time that the Métis arrest Scott, during an organized protest by the Settlement’s pro-Canadian forces, Riel decides to release him. Although he considers the Orangeman his “deadliest enemy”, he feels that he has to free him in order to appease public opinion, particularly among the English-speaking segment of the populace (1885, 96-97). This is a decision that Riel soon comes to regret, fearing that his antagonist “may elude me, go out of the territory, and marry the girl.” So when Scott is conveniently arrested again, Riel ensures that he will not escape. Knowing that the Ontarian “has an unbridled tongue, and is pretty certain to use it”, Riel instructs

his commander Ambroise Lépine to have one of his men use “a little judicious goading. . . , to provoke him to commit an assault.” Scott’s attack, according to his rival’s machinations, would then give the Métis government the justification to kill him for political insubordination. In Riel’s words to Lépine, “The government of this colony must be respected, and the only way to teach its enemies that it must be, is to make an example of one of the great offenders” (1885, 107-8).

As expected, Scott responds to the verbal abuse by the Métis guards by knocking to the ground the first soldier who attempts to “put chains upon him”, and is promptly charged with “treasonable revolt against the peace and welfare of the colony” (1885, 109, 112). Riel, who earlier had offered to free the prisoner in exchange for information about Marie and her father’s “abode”, again deceitfully proposes to “spare” him on the condition that he reveal the duo’s whereabouts (1885, 92, 116). Scott of course will not betray his beloved or her begetter even at the prospect of saving his own life. Consequently, after being subjected to a court martial under Lépine, he is summarily executed in such a “revoltingly cruel” fashion that the author confesses “it is with pain one is obliged to write about it.” Before being killed, however, Scott entrusts a sealed letter to his minister to deliver to Marie in case the execution is carried out. The clergyman duly honours his parishioner’s last wish and personally conveys the message to the young woman at her secret dwelling. A few days later, Scott’s “letter in her hand and his ring upon her finger”, a heartbroken Marie too dies (1885, 120, 122).

*The Story of Louis Riel the Rebel Chief* does not quite end with Scott’s execution at Red River. Collins devotes several more chapters of his “brochure immonde” to the ongoing Saskatchewan events of fifteen years later, even expressing the patriotic but hardly controversial sentiment that “the campaign goes on” and therefore “the duty of the hour is to put an end to the Rebellion” (Montpetit xxx; Collins 1885, 175). To all intents and purposes, though, when Scott

expires, so does the novel, and to a certain degree, Riel. Since so much of the narrative focuses on the political ramifications of the two men's rivalry over Marie, it soon becomes apparent that the action cannot really proceed once one of the adversaries has been so ignominiously removed from the scene.

Another aspect of Collins's work that becomes evident, as one reflects on the text, is how untypical it is of the literature on Riel and Scott. *The Story of Louis Riel* does not merely clash with the dominant views of the Métis chief and the Ontario Orangeman at the end of the twentieth century but completely reverses them, transforming the contemporary hero into a sex-crazed buffoon and the bigot into a martyr. Collins's Riel is clearly not the "great humanitarian" and "pacifist" that his most recent biographer, Maggie Siggins, judges him to be (qtd. in Poitras 3), but rather a bloodthirsty traitor. He is an unscrupulous libertine who, even though he purportedly "rejoices in the possession of three wives", leads his people into a rebellion they cannot win simply because a woman had the temerity to choose another man over him. Riel is simultaneously a despot, who "lord[s] . . . over" his community while he knows his army stands behind him, and a coward, who flees the moment "he sees the bayonets from Canada". Above all, he is a hypocrite. He is someone who orchestrates his archenemy's show-trial but then conveniently absents himself from the court in order not to be held accountable by either justice or history for the "sorry proceedings" (1885, 131, 73, 116).

In contrast, the Scott depicted by Collins is a genuine hero. The same individual who has inspired only one fifty-page monograph in the last 130 years (Robertson), and whose overriding image is that of an "agitateur orangiste" so obnoxious that even his fellow prisoners seem relieved when he is killed (Lemay 1884, 163; Sanderson 128-32), emerges as nothing short of a knight in shining armour. He is the Ontario gallant who risks life and limb to rescue a total stranger from

the treacherous waters of the Red River, a Métisse he will affectionately (albeit ungrammatically) come to address in her native tongue as “ma amie”. More importantly, Scott is a freedom-loving patriot ready to sacrifice all for country and empire. Certain that his ideas are just and will ultimately emerge victorious, he is a loyalist willing to die in an attempt to clear “the plains. . . of the mutinous blind, unreasoning hordes” that the villainous Riel has incited into open rebellion. As one of Scott’s friends comforts him before his execution, the cause of Canadian patriotism will always be associated with the Orangeman’s name and the “tyrant who prevails over you, will not triumph for long” (Collins 1885, 97, 85, 117).

An identical perspective on Riel and Scott informs Collins’s next novel, *Annette, the Metis Spy: A Hero of the N.W. Rebellion* (1886), which was published soon after the fall of Batoche. Since the second work is uncannily similar to the first--whole sections are simply lifted from the earlier text--it would be redundant to relate the plot. There are, however, some differences worth noting. For example, while the characters remain essentially the same, Collins transfers them to a higher social class. With the exception of Riel, he also changes their names, fictionalizing Scott’s. Thus the father of the eponymous protagonist is no longer a buffalo hunter or freighter but a colonel and “ex-officer of the Hudson’s Bay Company” and the Scott figure is now a captain with the North West Mounted Police named Philip Edmund Stevens. As the title suggests, the heroine is not named Marie but Annette, although Stevens betrays a too understandable confusion and at least once refers to her as “ma Marie” (1886, 86). Collins’s motivation for fictionalizing the Ontario Orangeman’s name becomes apparent toward the end of the novel; it enables him to allow his hero not just to eclipse Riel but to survive him and marry Annette once the rebellion is over, a momentous occasion that turns the “Duck Lake Mata Hari” into the “most popular woman in the North-West Territories” (McCourt 1949, 15; Collins 1886, 141).

Like *The Story of Louis Riel, Annette, the Metis Spy* is also not a significant contribution to Canadian letters. In fact, the most interesting element in Collins's second Riel novel is the short epilogue he appends to it. Only two pages long, "Notes" is both "one of the gems" of nineteenth-century Canadian literature and one of the truly curious documents in the theory of historical fiction. In it, Collins explains that he incorporates into his second novel "a few passages, with little change", from his earlier one because the "most notable authors have done this sort of thing; and chief amongst them I may mention Thackeray" (McCourt 1949, 15; Collins 1886, 142). In a statement that wreaks havoc with Alessandro Manzoni's dictum that, in historical literature, one must "be able to distinguish fact from invention", Collins also confides that "I present some fiction in my story, and a large array of fact. I do not feel bound, however, to state which is the fact, and which is the fiction." (Manzoni 64; Collins 1886, 142). To quote the author:

The preceding story lays no claim to value or accuracy in its descriptions of the North-West Territories. I have never seen that portion of our country; and to endeavour to describe faithfully a region of which I have only a hearsay knowledge would be foolish.

I have, therefore, arranged the geography of the Territories to suit my own conveniences. I speak of places that no one will be able to find upon maps of the present or of the future. Wherever I want a valley or a swamp, I put the same; and I have taken the same liberty with respect to hills or waterfalls. The birds, and in some instances the plants and flowers of the prairies, I have also made to order.  
(1886, 142)

Concerning *The Story of Louis Riel*, Collins further adds that his first novel "has been quoted as history; but it is largely fiction." Similarly, there is "no historic truth" in his characterization of

Riel and Scott as romantic rivals and thus in the claim that the Métis leader had the Orangeman killed because the woman they both love “gave her heart to that young man. I have seen that story printed again and again as truth; but there is in it not a word of truth” (1886, 142-3).

In spite of Collins’s cavalier attitude toward geography and the historical past, as well as his ethnocultural chauvinism, the fact remains that he is captivated by Riel. It is true that he never perceives the Métis chief as a fellow human being, to say nothing of a co-citizen. Still, Riel is central to both of his novels. While the leader of the two North-West conflicts may be described in a single paragraph as an “Arch Rebel”, an “arch disturber”, an “autocrat”, and “a heartless Rebel ruffian”, he is an individual that one can underestimate only at one’s peril, for Collins’s Riel has power. In an allusion to the recent assassination of U.S. President James Garfield by another self-declared mystic, Riel is the “thrice-dangerous [Charles] Guiteau [of] the plains” who has the support not only of most of his people but also of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and of Quebec’s political establishment (1885, 96, 47; Rosenberg 5). He is the “miscreant-fiend” who, even after sanctioning the “cold-blooded murder” of a young Canadian and indefensibly refusing to allow his body to receive a proper burial, is somehow able to escape “the vengeance of the law” (1885, 118, 125). In other words, for Collins, Riel is a satanic force that has infiltrated his world and that the author is unable to evade.

Riel, however, does not enjoy the prominence he has in Collins’s novels in too many other early works dealing with the events of 1869-70 or 1885 (Owram 1982, 317). For example, he does not even figure as a character in two contemporaneous plays about the latter conflict, George Broughall’s *The 90<sup>th</sup> on Active Service or, Campaigning in the North West* (1885) and L. Dixon’s *Halifax to the Saskatchewan. “Our Boys” in the Riel Rebellion* (1886). Written by soldiers, the two burlesque plays focus almost exclusively on military concerns, especially the

alleged mistreatment of the volunteers. The grievances of the troops in both texts are not so much against Riel and his “breeds” as against their own inconsiderate officers and the haughty media. In the words of one foreign-born soldier, “Sometimes, mine friend, and this is true,/ One meal a day was all we get” (Dixon 20-1). Or as another soldier complains fatalistically about the press, “No matter what sacrifice a poor volunteer may make. . . , there will always be in this world, a certain class who never contribute anything to the cause, but who live only to criticize and condemn” (Broughall 40).

The Métis leader also plays a rather marginal role in the numerous “‘poetic’ effusions” (Mulvaney 1886a, 246) elicited by the North-West Rebellion. There are exceptions, of course, such as Cleomati’s “To One of the Absent” (1885). Perhaps as befits a work that first appeared in the memoirs of two white women who survived the killings at Frog Lake, Theresa Gowanlock and Theresa Delaney, the poem is uncompromising in its celebration of the Canadian volunteers and settlers and in its condemnation of Riel. In Cleomati’s words to her “darling” fighting “poor Scott’s murderer”(63):

Let justice be done now and unfailing  
                   Nought but *death* can atone for his sin;  
 Let the fate he has meted to others;  
                   By our dauntless be meted to him,  
 Don’t return until quiet contentment;  
                   Fills the homes now deserted out west,  
 And the true ring of peace finds an echo,  
                   In each settler’s breast. (64)

Most other works on the subject, though, hardly acknowledge Riel. Instead, they focus on his

enemies, especially the Canadian soldiers. Poem after poem is devoted to the “loyal volunteers” who heroically preserved the North-West for “‘la loi’ et la Reine” (Bengough 70; DeGuise 16). Those patriotic young men ought to be celebrated not only because “Grim Privation and Peril followed them hand in hand” as they marched to battle but also because, in Riel and his allies, they encountered “[c]rueller enemies still; treacherous, scarcely human”. Indeed, it is only appropriate that Canada shed its collective “tears” for the soldiers, since it was those “vaillants enfants, grandis dans les alarmes”, who obliterated all its “anxious fears” (Wetherald 538; Desaulniers 13; Imrie 24).

By the mid-1970s, Margaret Laurence would have one of her Métis characters state that the “young *Anglais* from Ontario” who confront Riel in Saskatchewan “don’t know what they’re fighting for” (1974, 282). However, that is not quite the impression one gets from the writings produced at the time. Particularly after the Métis leader’s surrender, there was such an unassailable consensus about the heroism of the soldiers, and the perfidy of their opponents, that even a poet of Isabella Valancy Crawford’s stature is not able to escape the prevailing jingoism. As she writes in “The Rose of a Nation’s Thanks” (1885a):

A welcome? Why, what do you mean by that, when the  
very stones must sing  
As our men march over them home again; the walls of  
the city ring  
With the thunder of throats and the tramp and thread of  
feet that rush and run?--  
I think in my heart that the very trees must shout for  
the bold work done!

Why, what would ye have? There is not a lad that  
treads in the gallant ranks

Who does not already bear on his breast the Rose of a  
Nation's thanks! (45-6)

Or as Crawford states in "Songs for the Soldiers" (1985b), "It was a joyous day for us" when the volunteers "made that bold burst at Batoche,/ And with their dead flesh built a wall about/ Our riving land" (70-1).

Actually, the only writer who examines the traumatic events of 1885 from a First Nations perspective is Pauline Johnson. In "A Cry from an Indian Wife" (1885), the poem that would launch her career as a recitalist, the part-Mohawk Johnson subtly but unequivocally undermines the moral superiority that permeates the Euro-Canadian works, by addressing what has been called "the most important. . . question" in the relations between the First Nations and Europeans in the New World, land ownership (Chamberlin 4, 118; Keller 57-8). For her, the "white-faced warriors" are not the heroic defenders of the motherland but intruders into foreign territory, invaders who are "marching west to quell/ Our fallen tribe that rises to rebel." Thus, instead of bidding them welcome, she harangues them for their role in the oppression of her people:

Curse to the war that spills their harmless blood.  
Curse to the fate that brought them from the east  
To be our chiefs--to make our nation least  
That breathes the air of this vast continent.  
Still, their new rule and council is well meant.  
They but forget we Indians owned the land  
From ocean unto ocean; that they stand

Upon a soil that centuries ago  
 Was our sole kingdom, and our right alone.  
 They never think how they would feel to-day,  
 If some great nation came from far away,  
 Wresting their country from their hapless braves,  
 Giving what they gave us--but wars, and graves. (457)

Significantly, while Johnson focuses on the brave “Indian scout” for whose “vict’ry” no one prays and his “Indian wife” with her equally forgotten “wild, aching breast” (457), she does not say a word about the Métis, much less about their discredited former leader.

Riel is also largely absent from Ernest Henham’s *Menotah: A Tale of the Riel Rebellion* (1897) but for more “subversive”, not to say nefarious, reasons (Osachoff 1985, 63). Prime Minister Macdonald may have considered the politician-mystic “the moving spirit” behind the two North-West conflicts, even suggesting that he be recruited “as an officer” for Canada’s future national police force (1869, 408). For Henham, though, Riel could never have been anything other than a nonentity. By virtue of his mixed racial heritage, he was simply born not to lead but to be led--by one of his “purer” European cousins. As the author writes in his “Prefatory Note,” Riel is not portrayed as “an active character” in the novel because he was “a French half-breed of the ordinary stamp”, very much like his “dull-witted, heavy-featured and obtuse brother” who lives along the Red River. Indeed, the leader of that “hopeless [Saskatchewan] enterprise” was “so colourless, so commonplace, that a true picture must have been uninteresting, while a fictitious drawing would have been unsatisfactory and out of place” (ix).

Written by someone about whom little is known, except that he composed other romances about the Canadian West, *Menotah* is a relatively long and ambitious work. Among its stated aims

are a condemnation of First Nations-Caucasian sexual relations and a vindication of Archbishop Taché's heroic role in 1885. According to Henham, "one of the principal reasons" for the North-West Rebellion was "the unscrupulous treatment of the Indian women by the white invaders." He is especially critical of the Hudson's Bay Company, asserting that its conduct "well paved the way for this laxity in matters of morality." Henham also draws attention to the extent to which the events at Batoche were influenced by the "truly unselfish prelate" of Saint Boniface, a cleric who, "almost unaided, crushed the rising spirit of independence in half-breeds and Indians, and brought the insurrection to a close" (ix-x). Still, at the centre of *Menotah* is neither interracial marriage nor Archbishop Taché, to say nothing of Riel, but the elusive (and fictitious) Hugh Lamont, a fabled young Canadian sharpshooter who becomes known as the White Chief.

Lamont's shadowy involvement with the Saskatchewan uprising unravels, gradually but inexorably, through the undaunting persistence of an old hunter named Billy Sinclair. A Métis who claims to "know Riel", Sinclair discovers that there is a sinister third party behind the "nickle [sic]-plate god" and his plan to incite First Nations "to stamp the whole crowd of whites clean out of the land", an unknown individual "who's stirring him up, who's supplying the brains to run this rebellion, and all the rest of it" (11-3). As Sinclair subsequently relates the situation:

Riel was *not*, never had been, the prime factor of the revolution. Himself a dull man of irregular habits, yet one whose mind might easily be moulded, in unscrupulous hands, he was powerless to act as a sole leader; he could not forecast future chances without assistance. Left to himself, he would never have struck the blow for right and liberty. But, when sitting outside his shanty one summer evening, a young man came to him. His sudden arrival was in itself mysterious, and from the first he cast a powerful glamour over the great half-breed. . . . Riel talked

with the young Canadian, who was, on his own confession, the finest rifle shot in the Dominion, perhaps in the world at the time. . . . The heavy-featured man became delighted with the skill and flattery of the fascinating white, who soon began to pour into his ears a vividly painted word picture where his own name recurred frequently; in conjunction with such expressions as power and wealth unbounded. He was aware of Riel's intentions--his desire to reclaim the land from the oppressor. To be brief, he had come to aid him. (270)

Riel, continues Sinclair, is only the "nominal leader" of the Métis-First Nations insurrection. Its real head is Lamont, a white man who disguises himself "as a blood Indian, with the paint, feathers, buckskin and bead work of the native warrior." While the newcomer fails to deceive First Nations people about his true identity--it is they who name him "the 'White Chief,' or 'Father's Friend'"--he wreaks havoc amongst the Canadian forces. With his "unerring rifle" he kills many of the enemy, leading the troops "to dread the report of the Indian marksman's weapon." However, when Lamont realizes that his new allies cannot possibly avoid defeat at the hands of the Canadian police and militia, he secretly defects to the soon-to-be victorious side (270-1).

Sinclair is informed about Lamont's ignoble activities by "an Indian traitor" to the Riel cause--apparently "there were many of them" (271). The Métis hunter then proceeds to search for the white Canadian, whom he knew before under a different name, and confronts him with the accusation of treason. Lamont is unmoved and, when Sinclair threatens "to capture and hand him over to the Government", the adventurer snatches a revolver and fires at the old hunter. Sinclair somehow manages to avoid the bullet and disappears into the nearby woods. Yet the two men's destinies remain interlinked. Conscious of the fact that he is the only individual who knows the

White Chief's "actual personality", Sinclair becomes obsessed with Lamont (271). He eventually tracks the younger man to Winnipeg where, after abandoning his Cree lover, the Menotah of the title, Lamont has started a new life with a white wife named Marie Larivière. Like the tragic Menotah, who becomes estranged from her people because of her liaison with Lamont, Larivière too is oblivious to both her husband's romantic and political past. Thus, with the help of the two betrayed women, Sinclair corners the impostor but is unable to capture him. The last one hears of Lamont, he has just landed in Rio de Janeiro. A rebellion has broken out in Brazil--possibly Conselheiro's Canudos War of 1896-97, considering the novel's date of publication--and the marksman is ready for further action. In his words, "'A new rifle, and then for the strongest side. Besides, there are fine women among the Creoles'" (316).

The most remarkable aspect about the characterization of Riel in *Menotah* is that he is not so much a traitor as a nobody. Confederation's "nemesis" turns out to be one of the great frauds of all time. As Henham's narrator describes Lamont's motivation for joining forces with Riel:

He [Lamont] had previously gone over all ground, had reckoned every chance, as he thought, to finally arrive at the conclusion that an insurrection of Indians and half-breeds must be successful. He was but an ordinary adventurer, yet of more than average intellect. He would sway the mind of Riel, the invaders would be conquered and driven out, the half-breed leader would be chief of the entire country--nominally only. The reins of power would actually rest in his own hands. To depose the dull-witted half-breed and obtain entire leadership would then be a comparatively simple matter. (272)

That is, Riel is such a simpleton that there is little justification for including him in representations of the two watershed events in Canadian history so indelibly associated with his name.

Notwithstanding its title, John Mackie's *The Rising of the Red Man: A Romance of the Riel Rebellion* (1902) is also only indirectly, and negatively, about Riel. The whole "Prologue," in fact, is essentially an exposé of the "fanatic and rebellion-maker" who unscrupulously exploits his formal education to deceive his "ignorant" followers. It is early in 1885, and Riel assembles a massive group of First Nations people and Métis on a bank of the South Saskatchewan River in order to impart to them that the time is propitious not only to organize "a rising" but also "to start a church of his own!" Since the "red-bearded, self-constituted prophet" has learned from an almanac that there is going to be an eclipse of the sun that day,<sup>1</sup> he informs the gathering that the heavenly phenomenon augurs the dawn of a new age of boundless "food, tobacco and firewater" for all First Nation members who "would do as he told them" (9-10). Predictably, and to the utter terror of Riel's audience, the moon begins to block out the sun and darkness descends upon everyone. But before long the sun reappears and the crowd shouts in jubilation, convinced that the eclipse is a sign of the approval of Riel's prophecy by "the Manitou, the Great Spirit". As the "Prologue" concludes, "Never perhaps in the history of impostors from Mahomet to the Mahdi had an almanac proved so useful" (11, 13).

After such a impassioned introduction, though, Mackie seems to lose interest in Riel. The author does not completely ignore the Métis chief, for Riel's activities have such a devastating impact on the Saskatchewan countryside that they affect even the lives of the work's central characters: a widowed settler named Henry Douglas, his eighteen-year-old daughter Dorothy, and a Sergeant Pasmore of the Mounted Police. Indeed, it is only when the Métis capture Dorothy, as she attempts to seek refuge at Fort Battleford, that one discovers how truly depraved Riel has

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<sup>1</sup> Both General Frederick Middleton and Elizabeth McLean, one of the white people taken captive at Fort Pitt, also allege that Riel used his prior knowledge of an eclipse to manipulate his followers (Middleton 7; McLean 273).

become in his determination to “exterminate[.]” white people, “so that the elect might possess the land undisturbed.” In the chapel he has converted into his political and military headquarters, the Métis “dictator” tries to gather information about the young woman’s companions with a combination of “bombast, threats and flattery”. But she refuses to cooperate and Riel, feeling “his absurd self-esteem ruffled,” orders that she be jailed indefinitely, “until we decide what fate shall be hers” (61-2). Yet, once Dorothy is imprisoned, Riel virtually disappears from the scene and, perhaps as befits the work of an ex-Mountie who became the most prolific author of “adventure fiction of the nineteenth-century prairie West,” *The Rise of the Red Man* turns into another paean to “the red-coated soldiers of the Great Queen” (Harrison 54; Mackie 34). Still, in spite of his conspicuous absence from much of the text, there is never much doubt regarding the ultimate fate of the renegade “who hearkens to a false Manitou.” As a disaffected Métis prophetically tells Riel, by the end of his mission their people will be “scattered and homeless” and “the red-coats will catch you, for there is no trail too long or too broken for the Riders of the Plains to follow” (166, 149).

The Métis leader occupies a similarly peripheral place in several novels that proclaim to be about events intimately bound to his life and career. For example, Douglas Reville’s *A Rebellion: A Story of the Red River Uprising* (1912) opens with a forceful prologue in which the author states that “Riel. . . was mistakenly allowed to escape punishment for the brutal killing of Scott” and that he was “very properly hanged” for his actions during the second North-West conflict, “as he should have been in the first place” (n.p.). Yet Reville, a southern Ontario newspaper editor best known for his role in the publication of the first poem by his long-time friend Pauline Johnson (Keller 43), then proceeds to write a saccharine romance about Scottish Canadians to which Riel and the Métis serve merely as an exotic but faint backdrop. He does explore what he considers

Riel's barbarous treatment of Scott, including the macabre disposal of the victim's body "through a hole in the ice" of the Red River (108), but only cursorily. The inescapable impression one gets from reading the novel is that Reville is not interested enough in Riel, or does not think enough of him, to portray him fully even as a traitor.

Ralph Connor's *The Patrol of the Sun Dance Trail* (1914), too, is not so much about Riel as it is about the North West Mounted Police, the valiant third party that supposedly persuades Crowfoot and his powerful Blackfoot not to join forces with him at Batoche. Written by that most popular of Canadian historical romance writers, *The Patrol* does acknowledge the Métis, those "remote, ignorant, insignificant, half-tamed pioneers of civilization" and their "hair[sic]-brained flour-flusher" of a leader" (10, 24). But, as one might deduce after such a description, Connor is not exactly enamoured of either Riel or his people. On the contrary, the author wishes to celebrate the heroic role played by the Mounted Police in thwarting the alleged Métis plan to establish "an empire of the North, from which the white race shall be excluded." As Connor has one of his characters state toward the end, the reason that Riel "failed utterly in his schemes and that Crowfoot remained loyal I believe is due to the splendid work of the officers and members of our Force" (25, 362).

A somewhat more complex portrait of Riel, or at least more contradictory, emerges in Robert de Roquebrune's *D'un océan à l'autre* (1924). First published in Paris, Roquebrune's novel is a panegyric celebration of the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, particularly the role played by Father Albert Lacombe in making possible the monumental engineering project that would finally unite Canada "d'un océan à l'autre" (1924, 253). The protagonists are a Quebec City ethnologist named Augustin Ménard and his teenaged nephew Jacques, an orphan of whom he has custody. It is 1869 and the renowned "*sauvagiste*", who has devoted his life to studying

Quebec's indigenous peoples, determines to travel to the North-West with his ward in search of First Nations that have not yet been Christianized and thus have "conservé les mœurs cruelles des races indiennes" (1924, 19, 38). By the time the two men arrive at Fort Garry, the disturbances have broken out and the senior Ménard becomes directly involved in the conflict, even warning Riel that Tom Scott has assembled "une troupe de gens et qu'il a l'intention de vous attaquer." The focus of the novel, however, never really shifts to Riel or the Métis. Instead, it remains very much on Augustin Ménard's ethnological involvement with the militant (fictitious) Cree chief l'Ours and the adventures of his nephew who, partly as a result of having met a young Red River woman named Aline Guilbaut, decides to settle in the West once the political troubles are over. Indeed, the novel concludes quite symbolically with "les deux jeunes Canadiens" being married, not in a church or chapel, but "dans un wagon du Pacifique, entre Winnipeg et Calgary" (1924, 126, 253). The priest who blesses the nuptials is none other than Father Lacombe, the Oblate missionary often credited with persuading Crowfoot and other Blackfoot leaders to remain loyal to Canada in 1885 and inducing them to permit the Canadian Pacific Railway to cross their lands--the latter an achievement for which he was made "président honoraire" of the railway company (Roquebrune 1942, 31; K. Hughes 277, 298-307).

There are several intriguing elements in *D'un océan à l'autre*, not the least of which is its peculiar treatment of the historical past. Roquebrune was for many years the director of the Canadian Archives in Paris. Yet this "archiviste-historien", as one of his critics describes him, has the Orangeman Scott operate not out of the Protestant strongholds on the west side of the Red River but right in the heart of Catholic, French-speaking Saint Boniface (Chadbourn 444; Roquebrune 1924, 126). As well, when the Canadian troops capture Fort Garry, Riel does not begin the long period that would lead to his mental breakdowns and wanderings throughout much

of eastern North America. Rather, the reported bachelor migrates directly to the western United States “avec ma femme et mes enfants [pour] m’établir sur une terre dans le Montana.” Finally, in what is arguably the work’s most poignant scene, Archbishop Taché’s<sup>2</sup> refusal to give his “bénédiction” to Riel’s Saskatchewan campaign, the Métis leader makes a pilgrimage to Saint Boniface to receive “le geste sacré”. Similarly, at the beginning of the 1885 crisis, Riel does not resurface in Batoche but in “Winnipeg”, creating the impression that the two communities are if not contiguous at least relatively close to each other (1924, 141, 182-4, 167).

The most striking aspects of Roquebrune’s novel, though, are its unadulterated Canadian nationalism and its ambivalence toward the Métis in general and Riel in particular. For the author, as he writes elsewhere, the Confederation of 1867 is not merely the amalgamation of a group of provinces but “l’union de deux peuples en une seule nation”; it is a seemingly mystical political act by which the country’s French- and English-speaking inhabitants “ont cessé d’être étrangers, les uns pour les autres,” and collectively transformed themselves into “Canadiens” (1966, 186-87). Roquebrune’s pan-Canadianism is conspicuously evident in the ubiquitous image of the transcontinental railroad, signifying the realization of Canada’s long-awaited linkage from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. But it is also manifest in his novel’s national determinism, the belief not just in the desirability but the inevitability of the expansion of the country’s western frontier, that “c’est une loi humaine que les invasions se dirigent vers l’Ouest” and that “[c]ette région-ci est destinée à être envahie par l’Est.” As the Hudson’s Bay Company chief representative Donald Smith tells Aline’s parents, “La civilisation est plus forte que tout. . . . [L]e Nord-Ouest appartient au Canada et les Canadiens vont venir le coloniser, le peupler et l’habiter.” Or as the narrator subsequently says of Father Lacombe’s reaction to the imminent marriage of Aline and Jacques,

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<sup>2</sup> Taché was named the first archbishop of Saint Boniface in 1871.

“Une promesse de fécondité lui sembla venir de cette terre puissante et neuve et ce couple lui parut symboliser la jeune race [canadienne, blanche] qui la posséderait” (1924, 142, 48, 252).

Needless to say, such a transcontinental vision of Canada would be seriously threatened by the establishment of a Métis homeland in the middle of the country. Still, Roquebrune is not always dismissive of the “métis révoltés contre la Confédération canadienne” (1924, 109). At the beginning of *D'un océan à l'autre*, Augustin Ménard is not so much antagonistic toward Riel and his people as indifferent to them. The erudite student of pre-contact First Nations is just not interested in the “sang-mêlé, des gens qui ont pour pères des agents de la Compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson et pour mères des Indiennes christianisées et qui portent des chapeaux ridicules et des cotonnades achetées à Fort-Garry.” Later, after he reaches Red River and meets some Métis, he becomes openly sympathetic to their struggle and declares that it would be “tellement curieux cet Etat indépendant auquel rêve Riel.” However, by the end of the novel, even Ménard accepts that “Riel sera vaincu” in his “guerre contre les hommes de l'Est” (1924, 18, 118, 218). Someone like Father Lacombe is less ambivalent in his evaluation of the Métis leader. The part-Saulteau missionary, whom the Métis revere “comme. . . Dieu”, contends that Riel is deeply religious. Yet his “mysticisme est d'une nature parfois inquiétante”, for “en lui le mélange de la race indienne avec le sang français semble avoir produit un déséquilibre.” Moreover, Lacombe agrees with Donald Smith's assessment that the man from Saint Boniface “déteste les Canadiens”, whom he “considère comme des étrangers” (Roquebrune 1942, 33; 1924, 62). In fact, there are few indications in the text that any of the main personages questions that Riel and the Métis are destined to be displaced by the white newcomers from the East, the collectivity embodied in the union between Ménard's nephew Jacques and Aline Guilbault, “la fille de la Prairie, la représentante de la nouvelle race qui s'était emparée de l'Ouest.” The extent to which they do not

identify with the Métis cause is dramatically illustrated in the jubilant manner in which Aline greets the announcement that the Canadian troops have captured Batoche, “Le Père Lacombe. . . a de bonnes nouvelles à porter là-bas. Riel est vaincu. Il a été arrêté” (1924, 164, 249).

Roquebrune’s conclusion that Riel and his people ultimately will not be able to withstand modern civilization’s westward advance is perhaps inevitable considering his equating miscegenation with degeneration and his cognate desire to prove to Europeans, especially the French, that Canada is a pure white country. In an extremely forthright preface to *D’un océan à l’autre*, which curiously was excised from the work’s second edition (1958), he writes that one the most exasperating circumstances facing “l’homme du Canada à l’étranger” is the general assumption that all Canadians are if not “sauvages” at least of mixed-race. The Canadian promptly tells those misinformed foreigners that his people are neither First Nations nor Métis--since “les derniers Indiens achèvent de mourir dans leurs *réserves* où ils sont conservés comme des bibelots rares” and “il n’y a pas de métis chez nous”--but he senses that he will not be able to eradicate what he considers prejudicial stereotypes about his nation. Unlike his hypothetical fellow citizen, Roquebrune does not capitulate as easily in his quest to enlighten the outside world about the real Canada. As he states, after conceding that there is a “petite population métisse” in the Canadian West, the central aim of his novel is nothing less than to “faire comprendre aux étrangers que les Canadiens ne sont ni des sauvages ni des métis” (1924, 9-10). In other words, the resistance by Riel and the Métis to the Canadian intrusion into their territory cannot be but “un échec” (Viau 54), since they themselves barely exist.

Although Roquebrune’s Riel may be the inconsequential leader of a doomed people, he is incontestably the Métis chief. That is not at all the case in Cecil B. DeMille’s *North West Mounted Police* (1940), a work in which--as in *Menotah*--the politician-mystic is represented not as the

architect of the two North-West conflicts but rather as a creation of (imaginary) third parties that manipulate him at will. DeMille's film opens with Riel being visited at the Montana school where he teaches by two Canadian Métis, Jacques Corbeau and the Dumont-like Dan Duroc, who have come to ask him to lead their people in Saskatchewan and "wipe the whites out of Western Canada."<sup>3</sup> However, it soon becomes apparent that the visitors intend to have the Red River hero merely as the titular leader of the new First Nations/ Métis nation. The mastermind of the insurgence is not to be Riel but Corbeau, a heavily-armed whisky trader and murderer who dreams of controlling the liquor business in the whole of the North-West. Riel protests when he first learns of Corbeau's plans but before long he accepts them, since the half-Cree Corbeau is supposedly the only Métis who can persuade strategic First Nations to join their people in a common front against the Canadian government.

In any case, soon after Riel reenters Canada he disappears from the screen to be hardly seen again until near the end, as he is about to be transported to Regina under arrest. Obviously not driven by matters of historical fidelity, *North West Mounted Police* is less concerned with Riel's plight or that of his people than with the adventures of a Mountie and a Texas Ranger. Portrayed by Gary Cooper, the Ranger travels to Canada with a warrant for the arrest of Corbeau for crimes committed in the United States. Mountie Sergeant Jim Brett, i.e. Preston Foster, resents the intrusion into his jurisdiction by the southern interloper. This is particularly so once the gentlemanly Texan becomes his main rival for the heart of an angelic blonde nurse, given celluloid life by Madeleine Carroll. Still, as one suspected from the beginning, all ends well--at least for the main white characters--as the Mountie gets the nurse, the Ranger gets the evil whisky trader, and

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<sup>3</sup> The script of *North West Mounted Police* has not been published. Thus, all references are to the film (DeMille) and no page number is provided.

the uprising is suppressed.

G.H. Needler's *The Battleford Column: Versified Memories of a Queen's Own Corporal in the Northwest Rebellion 1885* (1947) also provides a rather unsympathetic portrait of Riel, but more in the Edmund Collins tradition of depicting the Métis leader as a religious and political zealot. As its subtitle indicates, the poem is the product of a veteran of the epochal Saskatchewan campaign, the

Last clash at arms on our North Continent

Twixt Red and White, the curtain here was rung

On the long drama: the fading light now spent,

Here fell the Red Man's goetterdaemmerung:

A fitting stage the spreading prairie's sward

By waters rune-wise whispering "Battleford". (1947, 47).

In the poet's words, this was a historic moment when the relationship between the First Nations of North America and the Europeans was finally established, "one to dictate,/ The other bide inexorable fate" (1947, 47).

For a work published at a time when Riel was beginning to be transformed into a Canadian patriot, and written by a worldly literary scholar, a respected professor and translator of German, *The Battleford Column* is closer in tone to a nineteenth-century vision of the Métis leader than to a mid-twentieth century one. Needler's poem is quite unforgiving of Riel's attempts to rally First Nations to his cause, his "[c]alling the Indian for his culprit's tool", or what the author elsewhere calls "the unpardonable crime of deliberately inciting the Indians of our Canadian Northwest to join him in a general crusade against the whites" (1947, 83; 1957, 28). As well, its focus tends to be, not on the "[f]anatic" and "his deluded quest" (1947, 5), but on the herculean obstacles faced

by the soldiers who had to cross the country to do him battle:

The C.P.R. just then was incomplete,  
 Hiatuses were in it, numbering four;  
 Indeed, it was an engineering feat  
 To blast a road at all through that North Shore.  
 And it is needless to remark, perhaps,  
 No pullmans functioned yet between the gaps.

The first, of forty miles, we made in sleighs  
 Collected there to hasten our transition.  
 This even verse but little sense conveys  
 Of bumpety bumps that marked the road's condition;  
 A wild night ride it was, with frequent dumps,  
 Varied with sprints to limber up our stumps. (1947, 8)

As Needler writes near the conclusion, the primary aim of his collection is to record for posterity the accomplishments of the young soldiers who “kept the faith and saved their souls alive,--/  
 Who smote the serpent, kept their country one” (1947, 80).

Needler's poem, though, is an anomaly among post-World War II representations of Riel. In fact, the only recent works of note that even raise the possibility that the Métis leader may have been a traitor to Canada are two poems by Elizabeth Brewster and Frank Davey. Brewster's “At Batoche” (1982) deals with a visit to the Saskatchewan battleground by a group of tourists, including the narrative voice. More specifically, it relates the unexpected discovery by the “poet”, as she reflects on the bloody struggle over this “godforsaken country”, that her sympathies are

less with the Métis than with the people who defeated them. She finds it quite easy to identify with Gunner Phillips merely upon spotting the young Canadian soldier's grave, even conjecturing that the nineteen year old probably believed he was "saving the West for the settlers,/ or avenging Thomas Scott" (50). The institutional idolization of Riel and Dumont, on the other hand, makes her suspicious and uncomfortable, drawing out an unmistakable sense of Otherness:

Folk heroes maybe?  
 or a parcel of rebels  
 as my grandfather thought them  
 and half crazy at that?  
 (If any relative of mine  
 fought in this battle,  
 he was certainly on Gunner Phillips' side.) (51)

For Brewster's poet the inescapable conclusion is that the current Canadian embrace of Riel and other Métis leaders as national heroes necessarily requires the vilification of their opponents, her own biocultural ancestors. Indeed, she even suggests that the state-sponsored reconstruction of the battle site is anything but innocent. In her words, at Batoche "the children of the victors/ have appeased bloodguilt/ by erecting monuments to the vanquished" (51; H. Adams 1995, 120).

Davey's poem, which is simply entitled "Riel" (1985), is important for two different reasons. As mentioned in the introduction, it playfully questions the realness of the Métis leader. But perhaps more important, it reveals an awareness of Canada's political and cultural past in a way that very few other works on the subject do. The key to "Riel" is the fact it has two ideologically discordant voices, the "poet" and his historically-minded mother. For while Davey's poet is fully aware of the dominant image of Riel in contemporary society, the knowledge his

mother has imparted to him forces him to recognize the fluidity of accepted truth. As he remarks, Riel “had done something and now it doesn’t matter./ He had done something but now it wasn’t something” (51).

Of course one of the things that Riel does is sanction the death of Tom Scott, the Ontario Protestant “troublemaker” who seems constitutionally incapable of respecting Métis rules or laws:

Even in Fort Garry prison he got himself drunk.

Had once tried to throw the boss of his road crew  
into the Red.

Maybe he was an anarchist individualist.

He called Riel a ‘dumb frog,’ the Metis  
‘a pack of cowards.’

Maybe he was a fascist running-dog.

He told Louis in colourful Protestant language  
to go love the Blessed Virgin.

Louis Riel said, ‘He is a very bad man,’

And sent him to a Metis tribunal.

The court found Tom

not up to community standards.

Man, this is one tough city, said Tom Scott. (52)

Another thing Riel does is keep “crossing the border”, both the physical international line between Canada and the United States and all sorts of religious and political borders. To quote the poet again, “The Real rebellion./ There was something fishy, my mother would say,/ about Louis Real” (56, 51).

Before concluding this chapter, perhaps it should be noted that, their views of the Métis leader aside, the early works on Riel the traitor are not always antagonistic toward his people. For instance, the caustic Collins may assert that “Riel is an impostor”, yet he also states that “the cause which he has espoused is a holy one” (1885, 74). While Henham portrays the politician-mystic as a nonentity, he has one of the Métis “most zealous to the cause” explain to his priest that he took part in the uprising because “the white man has taken all from us, except life. Let him take that also, or give us back that which makes it happy. That is why I fought, my Father” (228-9). Similarly, after Connor’s Commissioner of the Mounted Police describes the Métis leader as “crack-brained Riel,” he proceeds to tell one of his officers that the reason he is worried about the “restless half-breeds” is that “[t]hey have real grievances. . . , real grievances” (256). Bengough’s attitude toward the Métis can also be somewhat surprising. Only a few days after Riel’s hanging, the editor of *Grip* published a cartoon showing the allegorical figure of Justice, her back turned to Macdonald, telling the Prime Minister that she is not quite satisfied just because “Riel is gone.” In her words, “you have hanged the EFFECT of the Rebellion; now I want to find and punish the CAUSE” (Fig. 4). Even more unexpectedly, a few months later, at a time when numerous communities were erecting memorials to the volunteers, Bengough sketched a cartoon depicting “MISS CANADA” pinning a “REDRESS OF WRONGS” medal on the chest of a Métis soldier. As the cartoonist elaborates in his caption, Ottawa should “RECOGNIZE THE EFFORTS OF THE HALFBREEDS, BY GIVING THEM THE RIGHTS THEY FOUGHT FOR” (Fig. 5; Cumming 145-7).

The sympathy that those writers and artists show toward the Métis, though, is rarely extended to their leader. This is a situation that would change noticeably in the second half of the twentieth century. Davey and Brewster’s poems excepted, very few contemporary works on Riel



## JUSTICE STILL UNSATISFIED.

*Sir John.*—Well, madam, Riel is gone ; I hope you are quite satisfied.

*Justice.*—Not quite ; you have hanged the **EFFECT** of the Rebellion ; now I want to find and punish the **CAUSE**.

Fig. 4. "Justice Still Unsatisfied."



**ANOTHER DECORATION NOW IN ORDER.**

THE GALLANT VOLUNTEERS HAVING RECEIVED THEIR WELL-EARNED MEDALS, MISS CANADA WILL PROCEED (IT IS HOPED) TO RECOGNIZE THE EFFORTS OF THE HALFBRICKS, BY GIVING THEM THE RIGHTS THEY FOUGHT FOR.

Fig. 5. "Another Decoration Now in Order."

even reflect an awareness of the discrepancy between the ruling image of the politician-mystic today and immediately following his execution. There certainly have been no recent vengeful calls of “blood for blood;/ The death of Riel for the death of Scott”, such as in E.J. Pratt’s *Towards the Last Spike* (1952, 47). Instead, the dominant trend has been on reconciliation, the need if not always to incorporate the Métis into the larger Canadian family at least to understand them on their own terms. As Mick Burrs articulates the new reality, the 1885 conflict was not an uprising but “a war for independence”. Or as the same poet asks rhetorically, if you call “the people’s violent act against the government” a rebellion, “what do you call the government’s violent act/ against the people” (1975, iii; 1976, n.d.). Indeed, the Métis leader’s image has changed so radically since about the end of World War II that the very theme of the treasonous Riel has been supplanted by an equally old one, that of the martyr.

### Chapter III

#### The Martyr (I): Riel as an Ethnic and Religious Victim of Confederation

Un martyr ne meurt pas.

Louis Fréchette (1885-6)

Like the initial representations of Riel as a traitor to Canada, the first work on him as a martyr of Confederation was inspired by the troubles at Red River. Early in 1870 the Quebec writer Pamphile Le May published an invective condemning English Canada's reaction to the Métis leader's role in the execution of Tom Scott. Entitled "À ceux qui demandent la tête de Riel. Crucifiez-le! Crucifiez-le!" Le May's poem begins on an acerbic note, calling sarcastically for the crucifixion of "ce faux roi, cet infâme" the "bandit sans foi que la canaille acclame/ Et qu'elle appelle Majesté!" The scant irony there is in the work soon dissipates, however, as ridicule gives way to open vilification of anyone who expresses a desire to bring Riel to justice, the people the author characterizes as the "[j]uifs hypocrites de nos jours" (207).

For Le May, Quebec's "poète lauréat" and "gardien spirituel" of its "âme nationale", the outrage over Riel's treatment of Scott is transparently dishonest, since the Orangeman is a "victime ignoble" who had attempted to "plonger son fer, la nuit, avec malice/ Dans le coeur de

son souverain.” Riel, in contrast, is an “homme franc, juste et noble”, a compassionate individual whose sole ambition is to “faire régner le bonheur” (Pellerin 35; Roy 1924, 9; Le May 207-8). In fact, so gentle is Riel’s nature that it becomes patently obvious that the efforts to demonize him and to “déifier” Scott are not really about the two men (207). As the poet accuses the unidentified pro-Scott forces:

Ce que vous regrettez, ce n’est point la carcasse  
 De votre ami traître et vénal,  
 Mais c’est le sceptre seul, le sceptre aimé qui passe  
 Dans les mains d’un heureux rival!

Ce que vous demandez dans votre aveugle rage,  
 C’est que le Canadien-Français  
 Dont l’esprit généreux partout vous porte ombrage  
 Soit foulé sous un pied anglais!

Ce que vous demandez c’est que le catholique  
 Qui toujours si bien vous traita  
 Expire sur la croix, ô secte fanatique,  
 Comme son Christ au Golgotha! (208-9)

In other words, the clamour in English Canada following Scott’s death concerns not so much what Riel has done but what he is. Or rather, perhaps, what he symbolizes, Quebec.

Le May’s poem provoked such “remous dans la presse anglo-canadienne” that a fellow author wondered if one might not “allait prendre à la même corde Riel et son poète” (Pellerin 39;

Fréchette 1873, 181), yet it remains about the only work by a Quebec writer on the Métis leader's activities at Red River. While the early theme of Riel as a victim of ethnic and religious prejudice is basically a Quebec one, the man that Honoré Mercier in 1885 would call "notre frère" does not actually capture the imagination of his eastern "siblings" until after the fall of Batoche--Father Charles McWilliams, one of the two priests who accompanied Riel to the scaffold, relates that as late as September of that year he was unable to persuade even the Métis leader's "anciens compagnons de collège" in Montreal to show solidarity with the prisoner by signing "une requête au gouvernement" (Mercier 328; McWilliams 53). There are several reasons for this development. First and foremost, Quebec society has always been extremely ambivalent toward both Riel and the Métis, uncertain about "the degree of their relatedness to French Canadians" (A.I. Silver 1982, 159). Second, at least in 1885, there were two French-speaking battalions fighting not with Riel but against him, volunteers determined "à subir un insulteur, un drôle,/ Un vil menteur payé pour ternir l'auréole" (Desaulniers 9; D. Morton 1970). Finally, there are the matters of his religious heterodoxy and of his alleged animosity toward Quebec. To cite the testimony of the Franco-Catholic clergy in Saskatchewan, in addition to being an "HOMME NÉFASTE" and "UN MALIN ESPRIT," "notre ANTECHRIST", Riel considered French Canadians "CANAILLES" (André 7; Fourmond 15; Piquet 24).

Whether influenced by the perception that Ontario was increasingly associating the North-West conflicts with Quebec or by the "rôle mobilisateur du télégraphe", following Riel's surrender at Batoche Quebec at last started to lose its resistance to identifying with the "pauvre fou" who "était l'âme de l'insurrection" (Rens 47; Beauregard 52; A.I. Silver 1976, 95). Like their society, though, Quebec writers continued to exhibit a somewhat schizophrenic attitude toward Riel. They tended to see the Métis politician-mystic and his people, not as their brethren, but as "nos amis"

whose destruction would ‘humilier’ Quebec because of the friendship she bore them.” Without fully embracing him as one of their own, Quebec authors turned Riel into their ultimate religious and ethnoracial martyr. He was someone who was victimized essentially for his Quebeckness, his French ancestry and language as well as his Catholicism, the faith that the Catholic hierarchy was simultaneously contending he had forsaken in “SON APOSTASIE” (A.I. Silver 1976, 96; André 7).

The most celebrated work on Riel as a victim of Anglo-Canadian chauvinism is arguably *Le dernier des martyrs* (1885-6), a poem by another Quebec “poète national”, Louis Fréchette--as the celebrated critic Camille Roy once remarked, “le titre [est] facilement attribué chez nous” (1930, 89). Written as part of a subscription drive by the new Montreal newspaper *La presse*, Fréchette’s work situates Riel in the long line of francophone and Catholic martyrs. The Métis leader is actually not “[l]e dernier des martyrs” but rather “le plus récent” for the “opresseurs se sont toujours trompés: le sang/ Des héros en produit infailliblement d’autres” (1885-6, 3; Hayne 173). In fact, the poem’s central message seems to be precisely that the “héros malheureux. . . , saint et. . . martyr” must not be allowed to perish with his death. As Fréchette concludes, in an envoy addressed directly to *La presse*’s readers, “L’an qui vient de finir s’est appelé le Crime;/ Que l’an qui va s’ouvrir s’appelle le Châtiment!” (1885-6, 7-8).

Fréchette’s poet professes to be saddened by the fact that “l’ère des martyrs n’est pas encor [sic] fermée”, that fanatical English-Canadian Protestants could still harbour such hatred toward adherents of another Christian denomination. He mockingly even invites “primitive” nations like the Maoris, Hottentots, Sioux, Fijians, Boers, Zulus, and Comanches to travel to Canada to witness first-hand “ce qu’on fait quand on est baptisé,/ Qu’on est bon orangiste, et bien civilisé!” For the poet, the Orangemen’s behaviour is particularly unforgivable, since the objects

of their venom are a most amiable, and industrious, group. In his words, the Métis are a “brave petit peuple” that courageously “avait planté sa tente/ Au désert”. They are “paysans, sans fusils, sans canons” (1885-6, 8, 4-5).

Yet, in spite of the innate affability of the Métis and of the nobility of their psychologically troubled leader, who “pour protéger les femmes, les enfants,/ Se livra de lui-même aux vainqueurs-triomphants”, there is no placating their foes (1885-6, 5). While the Métis may be small and vulnerable, they are Catholic and French, and for their enemies that is all that matters. As Fréchette articulates the situation in a dramatic dialogue:

--Mais cet homme n'a fait que défendre ses frères  
 Et leurs foyers.--A mort!--Mille actes arbitraires  
 Ont fait un drapeau saint de son drapeau battu....  
 --A mort! . . .--Mais, songez-y, cet homme est revêtu  
 Du respect que l'on doit aux prisonniers de guerre:  
 Vous avez avec lui parlementé naguère.  
 --A mort! . . .--Mais tout rayon en lui s'est éclipsé;  
 Allez-vous de sang froid tuer un insensé?  
 C'est impossible!--A mort! . . . Mais c'est de la démence;  
 Pour lui le jury même implore la clémence. . . .  
 A mort! . . .--Un peuple entier réclame son pardon;  
 Son supplice peut être un terrible brandon  
 De discordes sans fin et d'hostilités vaines. . . .  
 Allons!--A mort!--il a du sang français aux veines! (1885-6, 6)

Or, as the poet makes even more explicit when he revises the work for his collection *La légende*

*d'un peuple,*<sup>1</sup> “--A mort! à mort! il a du sang français aux veines!/ A voilà son vrai crime” (1889, 287).

Fréchette does at times acknowledge the national specificity of the Métis. As we have seen, for him, Riel’s people are a band of diligent but uneducated pioneers, “ne lisant qu’au grand livre/ De Dieu” (1885-6, 5). In a footnote to a segment of the revised version of the poem, the author even states that, although the “Métis du Nord-Ouest. . . sont des descendants de Français unis à des Indiennes”, they “forment une race à part.” Still, the unfailing impression one gets from *Le dernier des martyrs* is that the Riel affair is not really about the Métis but about the French fact in North America, that is, about Quebec. The way the poet throughout the work refers to “notre peuple asservi”, “notre foi sainte” and “nos enfants, fiers, libres et français” makes it quite apparent that his subject is not Riel’s new American nation, the fusion of the First Nations and the European. Rather, it is the more strictly French society on the Saint Lawrence, the “race” that has earned itself a privileged place in the Americas “par droit d’aînesse et par droit de conquête” (1887, 343; 1885-6, 3-4).

The same sense that Riel’s hanging is merely an extension of Quebec’s perpetual struggle in Confederation, particularly the concomitant anti-French and anti-Catholic sentiment in the rest of the country, is evident in other works triggered by his trial and death, such as the anonymous *À la mémoire de Louis Riel. La Marseillaise canadienne* (1885). Also known as “La Marseillaise

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<sup>1</sup> In *La légende* (1889), Fréchette divides *Le dernier des martyrs* in three parts: “Le gibet de Riel” (279-81); “Le dernier martyr” (283-92); and “L’orangisme” (293-5). As well, he excises the envoy to the readers of *La presse*, which reads in its totality:

Frères, d’un nouvel an voici l’aube sublime;  
Du plus saints des devoirs c’est le commencement:  
L’an qui vient de finir s’est appelé le Crime;  
Que l’an qui va s’ouvrir s’appelle Châtiment! (1885-6, 6)

rielliste,”<sup>2</sup> this five-stanza poem on the “duel des races au Canada” became extremely popular in Quebec schools, reportedly transforming young scholars into “ardents cocardiers” (Groulx 1970, 36). To quote the initial stanza:

Enfants de la nouvelle France,  
 Doubter ne nous est plus permis!  
 Au gibet Riel se balance,  
 Victime de nos ennemis. (Bis.)  
 Amis, pour nous, ah, quel outrage!  
 Quels transports il doit exciter!  
 Celui qu’on vient d’exécuter  
 Nous anime par son courage. (Anonymous 3, n.p.)

Or as the poet adds in a refrain with an unmistakably Riellian touch, “Courage! Canadiens! Tenons bien haut nos coeurs,/ Un jour viendra (Bis.) Nous serons les vainqueurs” (Anonymous 3, n.p.).

The remaining four stanzas of *À la mémoire de Louis Riel*, a poem that members of the Quebec clergy “chercheront à interdire” after declaring it “séditieux” (Blais 1978b, 9), focus on the dreaded Orangemen, the “tyrans” who “voudraient nous voir au cercueil”. They also deal with the three Quebec federal cabinet ministers who remained loyal to Macdonald’s government, those political renegades who sold their “âmes” to the enemy and who “souillèrent ta noble histoire,/ Canada!” Tellingly, the poet always addresses his prospective audience as “[e]nfants de la nouvelle France” or “Canadiens”. In a work purportedly about the leader of the two North-West

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<sup>2</sup> The poem has been published by Denis Vaugeois and Jacques Lacoursière, but their version comprises only the first three stanzas (441).

conflicts, there is not a single reference to his own people, the Métis. Therefore, it does not seem illogical to deduce that when the author exhorts his listeners to remember the “[a]mour sacré de la Patrie” and that Riel’s name “souvent répété/ Nous parle de la liberté,/ Et nous prêche l’indépendance”, he is not alluding to a prairie homeland, be it on the Red River or on the South Saskatchewan (Anonymous 3, n.p.)

The centrality of Quebec is also unmistakable in two poems that Rémi Tremblay devotes to Riel. “Une épopée” (1885) is the more remarkable of the two, certainly the more ironic. Tremblay’s poem is the perfect antidote to all the unadulterated poetic celebrations of the 1885 volunteers, including Gonzalve Desaulniers’s “L’absolution avant la bataille” (1886), in which young Quebeckers proudly march off to the North-West to prove to the motherland that “tes fils d’aujourd’hui sont dignes de leurs pères” (Desaulniers 13). In a disingenuous footnote, Tremblay declares that he knows that “nos braves miliciens se sont couverts de gloire” in the Saskatchewan campaign. However, he strategically adds that his “chanson ne s’applique pas aux intrépides conquérants des Métis, mais seulement à ceux qui ont eu peur” (1885, 146). In other words, he is not interested in heroes but in cowards, those soldiers for whom:

Fuir est notre affaire  
 C’est notre salut, (*bis*)  
 Voilà notre but  
 Lorsque nous faisons la guerre.  
 Nous serons peureux  
 Et peux valeureux. (*bis*) [1885, 146]

In his effort to ridicule the volunteers, Tremblay is even ready to sacrifice Riel himself, turning the politician-mystic into a military nonentity utterly subservient to Dumont. As the author writes

of the soldiers:

Chacun a sa corde  
 Pour pendre Riel, (bis)  
 Mais quand Gabriel  
 Se montre, ô miséricorde!  
 On devient peureux  
 Et peu valeureux. (*Bis.*) [1885, 147]

Indeed, in contrast to the heroic volunteers of much English Canadian poetry, who for “kindred and country’s sake” intrepidly face the “Half-breed hell-hounds” (W. Campbell 1889, 267; Mulvaney 1986b, 74), Tremblay’s “beaux militaires” make sure that Batoche has been abandoned before they ever venture into the village. To quote one of the prudent warriors, “Prenons donc Batoche:/ Ces gueux de Métis (*bis.*)/ En sont partis” (Tremblay 1885, 146, 148).

Tremblay’s other Riel poem, “Aux chevaliers du nœud coulant” (1887) is more typical of the late nineteenth-century representations of the Métis leader as a victim of ethnic and religious prejudice. Even more uncompromisingly partisan and belligerent in its language than “À ceux qui demandent la tête de Riel” or *Le dernier des martyrs*, “Aux chevaliers” presumably won its author “l’honneur de perdre un emploi” with the federal government, and it is not difficult to discern why (Tremblay 1887, 70). A work of “une rare violence,” Tremblay’s poem presents all political figures who fail to support Riel not as his adversaries but as traitors, quislings who have “souffleté la patrie aux abois” and for whom “la trahison est un titre de gloire”. Those “[e]nfants dégénérés d’une race virile” are a servile faction willing to betray their native soil and faith for “le vile métal”, which is their “suprême loi!” Characteristically, in a work that decries the death of a martyr whose “sang. . . eut rougi l’échafaud,” there is not a word about that individual’s own

people. Or more precisely, Riel is simply incorporated into another collectivity, not his beloved Métis of the North-West, but the larger French-speaking community in North America (Blais 1978a, 158; Tremblay 1887, 70-1).

The general tendency to associate Riel with Quebec is evident even in the only known South American work on the Métis leader, Mathias Carvalho's *Poemas americanos I: Riel* (1886). Written by an obscure Brazilian author whose name appears to have vanished from the annals of his country's literature, *Poemas americanos* was recently rediscovered and published in a bilingual Portuguese-French edition by Jean Morisset, a Quebec geographer who has written extensively on Riel as an "écrivain américain" (Morisset 1987, 1989, 1997). Carvalho's poem is simultaneously a republican manifesto, an anti-English diatribe, and a paean to pan-American solidarity. In fact, the most original aspect of the work is that it depicts Riel as not just a national but a New World liberator. To quote Carvalho's preface, Riel is a "fearless fighter for Canadian independence" ["destemido lutador da independencia do Canadá"]. He is "a martyr to the most sacred of causes--the freedom of the motherland" ["um martyr da mais sagrada das causas--a liberdade da patria"]--a patriot who struggles to ensure that Canada, like the author's Brazil, will soon join the ranks of the newly independent nations that constitute the "gloria" of the Americas (16).

*Poemas americanos* is set against the backdrop of the U.S. Civil War. As the North and the South clash, what Carvalho calls the forces of "Good and Evil" ["O Mal e o Bem"], the slaves over whose fate they are fighting dream of a haven to which they can escape, a sanctuary where they can regain their humanity. For those "cripples of the New World" ["aleijões do Mundo Novo"], there is only one hope, that "boreal, sacred eminence,/ Canada" ["essa eminencia boreal, sagrada,/ O Canadá"] (20, 24). However, the "modern martyrs" ["martyres modernos"] are in for

a great disillusionment. After they begin their exodus northward, they learn that they will not be able to find shelter across the border, since “Canada lies in a dreadful prison” [“O Canadá--jaz em prisão terrível”]. As the poet elaborates, Canada is not a sovereign country but a colony, a victim of British imperialism. Rather than being a promised land for the oppressed of the world, Canada is itself oppressed, an unfortunate land into whose “generous heart” [“largo coração”] England’s “cursed dragon” [“maldito dragão”] has sunk its fangs (24, 30).

It is in such a context that Carvalho situates Riel. Aware of the misery that reigns not only in Canada but across the Americas, the Métis leader comes to the realization that “he could/ Save the motherland through combat” [“podia/ Salvar a patria pelo combate”]. Seeking inspiration from other New World liberators such as Benito Juárez, and “[a]sking nature for arms” [“Armas pedio á natureza”], Riel begins to envisage the moment when “Privilege” [“o Privilegio”] would finally be vanquished by the “sons of Reason” [“filhos da Razão”] (32, 38). In the poet’s words:

He saw. . . moving before his dazzled eyes  
 The image of the Union [Army]--repelling the soldiers,  
 Defeating the battalions of that English government,  
 Raising its head at a decisive moment,  
 Crying out to the continent: “Charge. . . forward!  
 Raise your arms! It’s your turn.”

[Elle via. . . passar nos olhos deslumbrados  
 O quadro da União--repellindo os soldados,  
 Vencendo os batalhões d’esse governo inglês,  
 Levantando a cabeça a um ponto culminante,

Gritando ao continente: “Avançai. . . para diante!

As armas empunhai! vos toca a vez.” (38)]

Riel, of course, is ultimately defeated, “assassinated” [“assassinado”] by the dastardly British. Yet the resistance by the “Man of the North to whom nobody gave a thought” [“Homem do Norte em que ninguém pensára”] is not in vain. Indeed, for the poet, the Métis leader’s struggle against foreign imperialism earns him a distinguished place in the pantheon of New World heroes. Along with the Brazilian protonationalist Tiradentes and the U.S. abolitionist John Brown, Riel forms an “American Triad” [“Triade americana”]. At a time when much of the continent struggles under foreign or local tyranny, they are giants driven by nothing but “the Love of the Motherland” [“o Amor da Patria”] (32, 52).

Carvalho’s portrait of Riel in *Poemas americanos* is clearly an idiosyncratic one. In light of the politician-mystic’s religious and political conservatism, it certainly seems incongruous to see him depicted as the epitome of republicanism and liberalism. After all, instead of being socially progressive, Riel was an ardent supporter of the Conservative Party, considered himself a direct descendant of France’s Louis XI, and claimed that “[l]e Métis comprend que l’église/ Est Reine à la tête de tout” (Riel IV, 320). No less unusual is the national affiliation that the author ascribes to his hero. Carvalho’s Riel actually fights, not against Canada, but for it. For the author, who never acknowledges the Confederation of 1867, Canada means essentially Quebec.<sup>3</sup> This is a society dominated by those perfidious English “*lords*”, including presumably Riel’s own nemesis, Macdonald, the “anti-liberator” or even “anti-Canadien” (Carvalho 26; Morisset 1983, 284,

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<sup>3</sup> This is a view shared by Carvalho’s translator, who contends that Anglo-Canadians should not be called Canadians but “Britamians” or British North-Americans, having usurped the names Canada and Canadians (*Canadiens*) from their lawful owners, the descendants of the French pioneers who settled the country (Morisset 1985b, 9, 55; 1983, 281).

1985b, 15). As Carvalho notes, “Canada must free itself from English slavery in the same way that we [Brazilians] must free ourselves from the slavery of the monarchy” [“O Canadá ha de libertar-se da escravidão inglesa do mesmo modo que nós nos havemos de libertar da escravidão monarchica”] (16). Curiously, considering the poem’s focus on the need of the peoples of the Americas to liberate themselves from oppression, be it imperialism or monarchism, Riel is completely dissociated from his own nation. The fact is that there is not a single reference to the Métis in *Poemas americanos*. As in most other works on Riel as an ethnic or religious victim of Confederation, the protagonist is simply integrated into the larger Quebec society. Or as Carvalho calls it, Canada.

There is actually only one early poem on the political martyrdom of Riel that consistently identifies his plight with that of the Métis people, Georges Lemay’s “Chant du Métis” (1886). Himself a Métis, Lemay does not minimize the ethnoreligious chauvinism that may have been responsible for the Regina hanging. On the contrary, he writes that almost immediately after Riel’s death a strong wind blows across the prairie, murmuring: ““Les lâches m’ont vendu!”” The Métis leader is thus not just a victim of perfidy, but has been betrayed by his own kind. Riel has been sold by the “valets des sectaires” to the wicked “orangistes” who, he says, are now obscenely celebrating “mon trépas: ‘Nous marcherons dans le sang des papistes,/ Nous foulerons leurs crânes sous nos pas?’” (1986, 566). Still, Lemay’s Riel remains incontestably part of the Métis nation. As the martyr from Saint Boniface posthumously evaluates his political career:

Ai-je plus fait que défendre mes frères,  
Dépossédés par des nouveaux venus,  
Que réclamer, sur ce sol de nos pères,  
Un coin de terre et des droits méconnus?

Et quand un jour, fatigués d'injustice,

Nos gens émus élevèrent la voix,

On cria: "Mort à la race métisse!"

On nos traqua jusqu'au fond de nos bois. (1886, 566)

That is, the target of Riel's enemies is not French-Catholic Quebec but the mixed-race people who claim title to the strategic centre of the country. Paradoxically, by killing Riel his foes do not destroy the Métis nation but rather provide it with a vital symbol of national resistance. As the poet addresses his hero, "Le gibet donne à ta cause un martyr./ Un cri vengeur s'élève de ta bière/ Que tout leur or ne fera que grandir" (1886, 567).

Lemay's poem, however, is very much an exception. Riel's Métisness is again subsumed into the larger Quebec world in two plays--both entitled *Riel*--published in response to the Métis leader's fate after Batoche. Written by two French immigrants, Charles Bayer and E. Parage, the first play is an extremely convoluted and tendentious political melodrama. For instance, the leading anglophone character, the Canadian government's commissioner in the North-West and governor of the Fort Prince of Wales, is surnamed MacKnave. In contrast, the visiting Franco-American journalist who wins the heroine's heart bears the family moniker of Francoeur. The two men's first names are no less symbolic. The viciously anti-Riel Anglo is George; the sympathetic Franco Georges.

In spite of its title, Bayer and Parage's *Riel* is only partly about the Métis leader. The play, which has a prologue and four acts, begins in 1873. MacKnave has travelled to Ottawa on official business, leaving behind his wife Élisabeth, their five-year-old daughter Nelly, and the child's Blackfoot maid, Takouaga. In the very opening scene of the prologue Élisabeth hears a long and terrifying wail, a "cri lugubre" that she has been hearing for about a month and that "me glace le

sang et me met la mort dans l'âme!" The ominous scream leads her to consider if it is not "le cri de ralliement des Indiens" despondent over the dispossession of their lands, auguring perhaps the "terrible vengeance" that the First Nations are contemplating against the encroaching white population (11-12). Élisabeth, who cannot understand why the government has failed to respond to the numerous grievances presented to it on behalf of the country's first inhabitants, now fears that the latter may be about to exact revenge for their neglect by attacking the fort and "nous massacrer sans pitié. . . et ma fille!" Her only solace is the thought that her husband has gone to Ottawa to "exposer au Gouvernement les souffrances des Indiens et des Métis" and to impress upon federal politicians the urgency of coming to the aid of "tous ces pauvres gens qui meurent de froid et de faim." Élisabeth, however, proves to be shockingly misinformed about her conjugal partner. For the moment MacKnavé returns home, without any prompting, he describes the First Nations and the Métis collectively as a "race rouge. . . maudite" that is "condamnée à disparaître." Moreover, he then boasts to his wife that, after falsely informing the government that the First Nations are set to burn Canadian farms and to "suspendre à leurs ceintures le 'scalp' sanglant de nos colons", he was given carte-blanche to treat them as he pleases. This of course he intends to do, planning to impose prohibitively high taxes on furs and give himself "les immenses bénéfices que je retire de ma politique." When Élisabeth begs him to have "pitié de ces pauvres gens, qui sont nos frères", MacKnavé curtly dismisses her by calling them "chiens!" (12, 14, 15).

MacKnavé is even more condescending when Takouaga informs him that she has learned through her son, a young chief named L'Esprit-Errant, that the Blackfoot have been assembling in the mountains and that it is up to her employer to determine whether there is war or peace. As he suggests that she tell her sons and his associates, "le gouverneur MacKnavé méprise les Peaux-Rouges et les Sang-Mêlé [sic]; que tous ces chiens réunis ne l'effayeront pas avec leurs

aboiments.” MacKnavé becomes particularly abusive after Takouaga lets him know that the individual who “protège mes frères” and who is “appelé à les conduire dans le sentier de guerre” is none other than Riel (16). It seems that the two men, indeed their families, have a long and bitter history of feuding. MacKnavé relates to Takouaga that his father was a Hudson’s Bay Company commissioner during the Sayer imbroglio and that, at the trial, Riel’s father invaded the court and “obligea mon père à lui rendre son butin et ses armes”. Later at the Collège de Montréal, where they were both pupils, the younger Riel and MacKnavé continued the family hostilities, even coming to blows over their diverging visions for the North-West. The governor has never forgotten the humiliation and has been plotting revenge against Riel ever since, confessing that “[m]a vengeance ne sera satisfaite que le jour où je l’aurai attaché moi-même à la potence qui l’attend” (17).

Thus, when MacKnavé is notified that Riel and L’Esprit-Errant have come to the fort to meet with him, he conspires to arrest both men. Suspecting her employer’s plans, Takouaga surreptitiously apprises the visitors of their danger, and further asks her son to “protège la fuite du sauveur de notre race.” Riel and MacKnavé do face each other but, at first, their confrontation is purely verbal. The Métis leader demands to know what the government intends to do regarding “nos justes réclamations”, commenting wryly that if after having “dépouillé les indigènes, on veut les tuer pour étouffer leurs plaintes” (20-1). His host responds in kind, branding the Métis people “mendiants” and their representative an “[e]nfant de chienne”. The next step is inevitable. When MacKnavé goes to search for reinforcements, Riel decides to flee with L’Esprit Errant but, mindful of his promise to his mother, the young Blackfoot elects to stay behind to ensure his leader’s escape and the “salut de nos frères” (21-2). However, just as Riel jumps out the window, L’Esprit-Errant is killed by MacKnavé’s soldiers. Watching her son die before her eyes, Takouaga

vows to avenge his death by kidnapping her charge, Nelly. In her words, “Le maître a pris mon fils, je lui prends sa fille. . . oeil pour oeil, dent pour dent.” Élisabeth, in turn, is devastated by the abduction of her only child. As she admonishes her husband before she too expires, “Je te l’avais bien dit que Dieu te punirait. . . tu n’as plus. . . de fille. . . et moi. . . moi. . . je suis morte!” Or as MacKnavé himself acknowledges, “Malédiction!” (23, 24).

The remaining four acts of Bayer and Parage’s play take place twelve years later, in 1885, but in them the focus shifts almost exclusively to MacKnavé’s daughter. Nelly is now a teenager named Kaïra, who is being raised as a Blackfoot by Takouaga. It is the eve of the Saskatchewan campaign and there are numerous visitors to the Blackfoot camp, including a Jewish merchant named Abraham and a British journalist by the name of Steward. Most prominent among them, though, is the aforementioned Francoeur, a reporter with the *Courier des États-Unis*. Francoeur soon falls in love with Kaïra, and she with him. Therefore, when MacKnavé attempts to abduct the strikingly beautiful young woman, of whose identity he is unaware, it is Francoeur who first comes to her assistance, and is shot in the arm for his effort. Later, after Kaïra learns that the man who plotted to kidnap her is actually her father, she piously decides to follow her progenitor, since “[m]on devoir est de vous obéir” (33, 40, 67). Takouaga, however, is not prepared to lose another child to her ex-employer and fatally stabs him, precipitating a death-bed epiphany in which MacKnavé comes to the realization that “Dieu, en me refusant le bonheur au moment où j’y touchais, m’a puni de mes crimes! . . . que son nom soit béni.” So, with Kaïra’s father conclusively removed from the scene, Francoeur finally succeeds in winning both her hand and her heart. In his triumphant words, just before announcing that he is going to write “au livre de l’histoire” the true account of the conflict that he has witnessed in the North-West, “La Providence a ses desseins, ma chère Kaïra; c’est maintenant ton mari qu’il faut suivre” (68, 69).

There are several striking elements in the *Riel* of Bayer and Parage. To begin with, the governor and commissioner MacKnavé is an individual consumed by revenge. Yet his need for retribution is grounded in sociohistorical reality, his conviction that he and his family have been grievously injured by the Riels. Untypically for an anglophone representative of the Canadian government, he is also educated at the Collège de Montréal. The last detail inevitably leads one to conclude that, in the context of the work's ideology, a Franco-Catholic education cannot really overcome an individual's genetic and cultural heritage, at least if the individual in question happens to be Anglo-Celtic. As well, although she is ignorant of her husband's character and politics beyond credibility, Élisabeth MacKnavé entertains surprisingly pro-First Nations views. But then, perhaps, one should not be too surprised. Considering the spelling of her first name, she is likely a francophone and, in this play, that is synonymous with being compassionate.

Even less commendably, Bayer and Parage's melodrama is blatantly racist and sexist. Its sexism is quite evident in the characterization of the relationship between Francoeur and Kaïra, where Providence itself is invoked to help assure the young woman's transition from being her father's chattel to her husband's. The work's racism is equally conspicuous. In fact, so negative is the Frenchmen's portrayal of Abraham and Steward that a critic has stated that if it were not for "l'anachronisme, on croirait les dramaturges de bons nazis" (Collet 1986, 249). The Jewish merchant and the reporter for the *Pall-Mall Gazette* are not only perfidious but also inarticulate, two caricatures whose deformed French seems to be a direct reflection of their moral inadequacy. For example, upon meeting Francoeur, Steward explains that "le journal de moâ, il avait enterpris de régénérer le Angleterre et les colonies de elle, en dévoilant les vices, les tourpitioudes qui infectent les populations de elle." Abraham, on the other hand, brazenly attempts to swindle the Blackfoot in his dealings with them. But, when he discovers that instead of being easy prey to his

schemes, they have actually deceived him, he begins to bellow hysterically: “Ah ma bar qui est folée aussi. . . ah! les chiens! . . . les foleurs! . . . les Juifs! . . . (*Se reprenant.*) pas les Juifs. . . les Beaux-Rouges!” Similarly, it is Abraham who, after being caught selling liquor illegally, agrees to become MacKnavé’s “agent secret” and assists the governor in his aborted attempt to abduct Kaïra (34, 37, 38).

The playwrights also take considerable liberties with the historical record--or make an elementary error--when they portray the Blackfoot, as opposed to their historical rivals the Cree, as Riel’s main First Nations allies. As we saw in the previous chapter, particularly in *Connor and Roquebrune*, the significance of the Blackfoot in 1885 was precisely that they did not join forces with the Métis--a decision traditionally attributed to the influence of either the Mounted Police or Father Lacombe but which historians now credit primarily to the work of chiefs Crowfoot and Red Crow (Dempsey 1972, 167). Riel himself appears to have had a rather negative opinion of the Blackfoot, describing them as “nothing but savages. . . , indians in the true sense of the word.” Yet Bayer and Parage not only have the Blackfoot supporting Riel but becoming utterly subservient to him and his people, a collectivity popularly known as “the Cree mixed bloods” or “the French-Cree Red River breeds” (Riel II, 240; Dempsey 1972, 124; Schultz 380). Moreover, the authors further compound this confusion by naming Takouaga’s son L’Esprit-Errant, which is the same name as the Plains Cree “war chief” believed most responsible for the killings at Frog Lake, Wandering Spirit (Stanley 1936, 338; Van Kirk 1982).

Perhaps even more pertinent in terms of the subject of this study, Bayer and Parage’s play only deals peripherally with Riel. The Métis leader, as mentioned above, is not completely absent from the action. Actually, in one of the work’s most interesting scenes, a disguised MacKnavé infiltrates the Blackfoot camp and, allegedly on behalf of Ottawa, offers Riel a bribe of “[t]rente-

cinq mille piastres” to end the war. The Métis leader of course will not be bought, since a “vrai Canadien français ne sait pas trahir.” Therefore, when MacKnave realizes that he cannot “deshonorer” his life-long adversary, he decides to kill him, but the governor’s wig falls off during the ensuing fight, and Riel has MacKnave arrested instead. Despite Dumont’s pleas that he hang the would-be assassin, Riel categorically refuses, asserting that he does not want his enemies to say that “nous tuons nos prisonniers; ne leur donnons pas cette satisfaction” (45-6). However, while in captivity, MacKnave offers his Métis guard Charles Nolin<sup>4</sup> “deux mille piastres” and the promise that the “service que tu vas rendre au Gouvernement sera payé au poids de l’or”, and Nolin frees him. Riel is so devastated when he discovers the treason by his “secrétaire intime” that soon after he decides to surrender to the Canadian forces, on the condition that they assure him that “l’insurrection aura cessé de faire des victimes” (47, 49-50).

In another scene also charged with political symbolism, during his “procès sans nom,” Riel experiences an “APOTHÉOSE” in which he anticipates his imminent martyrdom (53-4):

*À ce moment, la toile du fond s'ouvre doucement par le milieu, laissant voir à l'arrière-plan le sosie de Riel, à genoux, tête nue, la chemise entr'ouverte sur la poitrine, la corde au cou; au-dessus, sur un piédestal, la "Liberté", vêtue d'un péplum blanc, tient suspendue sur la tête du supplicié une couronne d'immortelles. À droite et à gauche, du piédestal, des Indiens et des Métis donnent la main à des Canadiens et des officiers du 65e [one of the two French-speaking battalions that participated in the North-West Rebellion (D. Morton*

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<sup>4</sup> Like Elzéar Paquin later, Bayer and Parage often do not provide their characters with first names. However, from the context, I am assuming that Nolin is Charles Nolin, the still controversial Métis leader who was “un des principaux instigateurs de la prise d’armes en 1885, et par la suite témoin de la couronne au procès de Louis Riel” (Payment 110).

1970)]; *entre eux, des instruments d'agriculture, des charrues, des gerbes de blé, etc. . . . Au premier plan, Riel. . . , la tête appuyé sur une main, l'oeil fixe, croit voir cette vision comme dans un rêve.--La musique joue en sourdine et lentement la "Marseillaise".--La toile du fond se referme doucement, reformant les murs de la prison de Riel. (54-5)*

Throughout most of the play, though, Riel is completely overshadowed by the romance between Nelly/Kaïra and Francoeur. While he may be “le glorieux martyr canadien”, as is stated after his death, the playwrights do not even include him in the last act. Indeed, it is difficult to disagree with the suggestion that a more adequate title for the play would be, ““Kaïra ou La Vengeance de Takouaga”” (Bayer and Parage 66; Collet 1986, 247).

Riel has a more central role in the other play written about him in 1886. The sole dramatic work by a Quebec medical doctor and writer on politics and infant hygiene, Elzéar Paquin’s *Riel* is a lengthy and overtly factional four-act historical drama. Its partiality is apparent in the very list of dramatis personae, in which the author describes Riel as “le grand Patriote martyr” and Scott as “le bandit” (n.p.). In the stage directions for Act I, Paquin also stresses that he will be addressing the “CAUSES ET PRINCIPAUX APERCUS [SIC] DU SOULÈVEMENT DE 1869-70, FAUSSEMENT APPELÉ INSURRECTION OU RÉBELLION.” Then, in the preamble to Act IV, he characterizes Riel as a “HÉROS POLITIQUE” and his sentence at Regina as a “MEURTRE JUDICIAIRE”, a travesty of justice that supposedly leaves “LA RACE FRANCO-CANADIENNE” two distinct choices: “D’UN COTÉ, L’OPPRESSION ANGLAISE ET LE JOUG ORANGISTE, DE L’AUTRE, LA POLITIQUE LIBÉRALE DU PARTI RÉFORMISTE OU L’ANNEXION AUX ETATS-UNIS” (5, 93).

The same explicit political tendentiousness is also evident in the play proper. Paquin, for

example, opens his *Riel* with a caustic denunciation of the First Nations. He is particularly critical of the supposed endemic indolence of the men, who sit around smoking and drinking while their women “travaillent tant qu’elles peuvent, font tout l’ouvrage!” The author is no less appalled by their spiritual life, though. As he has Father André comment about the “pauvres infidèles”, it is a “pitié de voir de nos semblables plongés dans ces ténèbres d’ignorance et d’idolatrie” (5, 11). Contrary to their deepest beliefs, the Manitou that they worship is not “le Maître absolu” but “le démon, le chef de tous ceux qui se sont révoltés, dans le ciel, et que le Tout-Puissant a précipités dans les flammes de l’enfer.” This spiritual darkness is about to be extinguished, however. For in what has to be the swiftest religious conversion in literature, the same First Nations individual who one moment proudly refers to his people’s supreme being as “notre Manitou”, the next is pledging his devotion to Catholicism. In his words to Father André, “Vive votre Dieu! Nous voulons vous écouter et vous suivre” (12-3)

In the process of dramatizing the spiritual poverty of the First Nations, which culminates in their embracing the “religion [qui] fait des hommes et des saints”, Paquin also makes sure to identify the parties responsible for their plight, the Canadian government in particular and Anglo-Saxon civilization in general. Thus, early on a First Nations man accuses Ottawa’s white agents of giving his people only “du bœuf pourri, du pain noir et *mouzi*” (13, 8). Another, after explaining that the Mounted Police are forbidden to sell them liquor, states that, “En échange de tous ces terrains riches. . . , j’ai reçu d’un officier du gouvernement canadien une bonne quantité de lard, de farine et plusieurs gallons de whisky.” The second man further asserts that he has come to understand that “ces officiers envoyés du Canada sont des malfaiteurs” who have been sent to the North-West expressly “pour notre ruine”. Indeed, his only source of hope is that he knows that “le brave Riel a déjà jeté un cri d’alarme, dont les échos retentissent jusque dans les profondeurs

de nos bois” (9-10).

The reason that Riel becomes critically important to the second First Nations man, as he does to Paquin, is that he is the first individual who realizes that the Canadian government’s objective in the North-West is nothing less than to destroy the Métis people and the First Nations. As Riel confides to a fellow Métis, “j’ai découvert le dessein pervers que nourrissent. . . tous ces émigrants et tous ces arpenteurs d’Ontario. Tous, ils ont la même idée, les mêmes intentions; tous, ils veulent nous exterminer ou nous chasser de nos maisons” (19). Riel is also the first person to surmise that Ottawa is so intent on eradicating the Métis from the North-West because it is an instrument of the Ontario Orangemen, the influential Protestant group that is not only xenophobic but also uncivilized and even un-Christian. To quote him again, “la secte orangiste! secte sanguinaire! maudite par la civilisation et le christianisme!” Or as one of his supporters states, the Orangemen are “la secte la plus vile et la plus détestable aux yeux du monde chrétien” (46, 72).

Unfortunately for Riel, his relentless struggle against the Canadian government’s takeover of the North-West and Anglo-Protestant expansionism starts to take its toll, both physically and mentally. As his wife Marguerite foresees early in Act II, “la fureur de l’orangisme et la trahison nationale vont me le ravir!” Riel’s mental decline begins with his forced exile from Manitoba for what one of his followers calls “le crime de nous avoir trop aimés,” and is exacerbated by the malicious persecution he continues to suffer, which produces “une si grande surexcitation de son cerveau” that he has to be hospitalized (39, 44, 51). The omnipresent “méchanceté” that Riel encounters in the world causes him not only to lose “l’équilibre de ses facultés mentales” but also, in Dumont’s analysis, to succumb to “des extravagances religieuses certainement dangereuses. Victime comme nous de tant de persécutions et d’injustices, il s’égare” (112). Riel does recover his health and settle in Montana and, when the Saskatchewan Métis request that he lead them in

1885, the Red River “libérateur” again comes to his brethren’s rescue. Yet, in spite of being “revêtus de l’armure invincible du droit”, the Métis are defeated by the more powerful Canadian forces. Riel himself, that “magnanime et immortel patriote, extraordinaire par son admirable désintéressement”, surrenders to the enemy in order to “mettre fin aux horreurs de la guerre” and “pour le bonheur de mes semblables et la gloire de mon pays” (64, 71-2, 90).

Paquin’s play does not end at Batoche, though. The whole of Act IV, in fact, is devoted to Riel’s trial and its devastating aftermath. Paradoxically, in an attempt to absolve the Métis leader of any culpability for the blood shed in the two North-West conflicts, the author virtually denies his hero a political role. According to Paquin’s characterization, Riel is not accountable for the Red River troubles because his actions are “la plus noble revendication nationale contre la plus noire et la plus basse conspiration militaire.” His crime, like Joan of Arc’s, is simply that he has “jeté la terreur dans la nation anglaise”. To quote Dumont’s explanation, “Riel n’avait aucun contrôle, aucun droit de vote ou de sanction relativement aux décisions du conseil de guerre, sous le gouvernement provisoire. Riel n’était que le président de ce nouveau gouvernement” (103, 105-6, 111). Similarly, the Métis leader is in no way implicated in the Frog Lake Massacre. In spite of the historical Riel’s explosive words to “Métis et. . . Sauvages” to rise up against the Canadian forces, “Soulevez-vous. Faites face à la Police. . . . [P]renez le Fort Bataille. Détruisez-le”, he supposedly bears no responsibility whatsoever for the incident in which Big Bear’s Cree killed nine people, including “two [Catholic] priests and. . . a French half-breed” (Riel III, 79; Stanley 1936, 339; Van Kirk 1982, 460). To cite Dumont again, “Responsable de ce massacre! Comment? Pourquoi? Il a eu lieu à son insu! Gros-Ours et sa bande seuls en sont les auteurs. Riel était à Batoche bien loin de ses sauvages, n’ayant aucune communication avec eux” (111). The politician-mystic is portrayed as being so little involved with the North-West Rebellion of 1885

that one begins to suspect that perhaps there is something to the thesis propounded by people like Henham and DeMille that he was merely its nominal leader.

Toward the end of the play, Paquin further diminishes Riel's role as a Métis political leader by alienating him from his own people. After declaring his protagonist's trial "l'homicide politique de Regina", he proceeds to evaluate the impact of Riel's death not on the Métis nation but on Québec. Paquin's *Riel* actually concludes with two characters discussing the advantages and disadvantages of "l'annexion de la province de Québec aux Etats-Unis", and there is little doubt which side the author favours (127, 142). A certain Senator Trudel, presumably the ultramontane journalist and politician that Riel once called "un de mes bons amis" contends that, "sous la Couronne d'Angleterre, si nous le voulons, nous pourrions devenir le plus grand peuple de l'Amérique." A (fictitious) Franco-American, however, claims that "l'annexion aux Etats-Unis est une question de temps." For the symbolically named Jean-Baptiste, the benefits of such a union are not only economic and political but also spiritual and ethical. In the utopian words with which he closes the play, "Les préjugés disparaîtront, la vérité reluira, et on comprendra que sous le rapport religieux comme sous le rapport matériel, le peuple canadien aura tout à y gagner" (*Riel* II, 200; Paquin 142-3).

As has often been acknowledged, Paquin's *Riel* is a politically intriguing but structurally flawed work. For example, one critic considers it "the most boring play" ever written about Riel. Another states that the author "a beaucoup à dire, mais il ne sait pas comment le dire." Still another asserts that the characters are not individualized figures but "des porte-parole de l'auteur, des personnages-mannequins évoluant à travers un espace théâtral mal défini" (Osachoff 1982, 131; Bélanger 1978b, 662; Doucette 128). Paquin's dramaturgical ineptitude is definitely difficult to ignore. This is seldom more evident than near the conclusion of the play. As several characters

read verbatim the reaction to Riel's hanging in Quebec newspapers, one of them comments matter-of-factly, "J'ai lu dans *La Vérité* de Québec, quelque chose d'aussi fort et d'aussi beau! Malheureusement, j'ai perdu les extraits que j'en avais faits" (131). In a essay comparing Paquin's *Riel* with Bayer and Parage's, the theatre historian L.E. Doucette makes some observations worth noting. Doucette, who finds both plays "dramatisés mais peu dramatiques," claims that the chief differences between the two French immigrants and the "Québécois de vieille souche" are essentially national ones (130, 123). In his words, Paquin's "défauts ne sont pas moindres, mais cette fois ils sont bien canadiens et proviennent surtout d'un respect trop soucieux des données historiques." Even the Quebec playwright's xenophobia, it seems, is home grown. According to Doucette, while Paquin is no less bigoted than Bayer and Parage, he is "raciste aussi à sa façon," stressing particularly the social and moral superiority of the Métis over the First Nations. Thus, instead of "l'anti-sémitisme *gratuit* des Français. . . , le racisme ici vise un but important: il s'agirait de rehausser la nation métisse vis-à-vis des Amérindiens, en soulignant sa supériorité fondamentale due à une culture canadienne-français [sic]" (127-8). One of the most striking aspects of Paquin's play is certainly the way he coopts Riel and the Métis. By minimizing the First Nations portion of their biological and cultural heritage, he is easily able to incorporate them into the larger Quebec family. Indeed, as he portrays them, they are simply Quebeckers who happen to live in Western Canada.

Riel is claimed by yet another collectivity, France, in Joseph-Émile Poirier's *La tempête sur le fleuve* (1931). First published under the self-consciously anti-Voltairian title of *Les arpens de neige* in 1909, the Frenchman's novel focuses primarily on the 1885 events in what a Quebec critic calls the "'chez nous' lointain de la Saskatchewan" (Poirier 1909, 11; Roy 1912, 311). The work's ideological identification is established early. In the opening pages Riel's people are

described as the “métis franco-indiens du Nord-Ouest” and “ces demi-Français”. Their enemy too is not the Canadian government but “le gouvernement anglo-canadien”. Similarly, among the “incessantes vexations” that provoke the clash at Batoche is the fact that Ottawa “venait. . . de vendre, à des Sociétés de colonisation et à des Syndicats agricoles, une paroisse métisse tout entière, celle de Saint-Louis-de-Langevin” (1931, 8, 89, 8).

The focal point in *La tempête sur le fleuve*, the first novel by a writer best known for his poetry and with an “âme de poète” (Roy 1912, 311, 315), is the relationship between two Métis brothers, Pierre and Jean La Ronde. Their conflict is both personal and political. Jean, who at twenty is two years younger than his brother, is extremely insecure about his mixed heritage. For example, upon being informed after a freighting trip of recent Métis military successes against the Canadian forces, he fails to show any enthusiasm. Quite the opposite, he remarks curtly to his father that, “tu sais ben que les journaux anglouais nous traitent déjà de sauvages! . . . On veut donc qu’ils ayent raison. . . Si les Cries et les Pierreux se mettent avec nous. . .”. Therefore, when circumstantial evidence suggests that Jean supports the English settlers, the community immediately begins to suspect him of treason. Pierre is especially critical. After confiding to a French visitor that Jean “a pas le cœur d’un Bouais-Brûlé”, he even refuses to shake hands with his sibling, saying that “je ne touche pas la main aux amis des ‘Vestes-Rouges!’” (1931, 17, 46, 51).

Pierre’s suspicions regarding his brother’s treachery seem to be confirmed when a group of Métis notices Jean’s horse in the possession of a British-born gentleman farmer named Hughes Clamorgan and his twenty-year-old daughter Elsie. The younger La Ronde apparently has saved the Clamorgans from “une mort certaine et probablement horrible” during the burning of Fort Pitt and then lent them his horse to reach safety at Battleford, but the only information about the case

that he shares with his brother is that he is aware of the fort's "prise et l'incendie" (1931, 50). Described as an "anglo-saxon de pure race et. . . un type parfait du gentleman roux d'outre-Manche", Clamorgan is an inveterate snob and xenophobe who disdains both of the country's dominant cultural and linguistic groups. In the narrator's words, "il estimait les Anglo-Canadiens fort inférieurs aux gens de la métropole; les descendants de Français lui semblaient tout à fait négligeables." Above all, Clamorgan loathes the Métis, whom he dismisses as a "race dont il ne convenait pas de faire le moindre état." Yet Pierre appears more disturbed by the romantic implications of his brother's involvement with Elsie than with the political ones. He simply cannot understand how a true-blooded Métis male could possibly become emotionally involved with "une Anglaise, une hérétique, quand il y avait parmi les Bois-Brûlés et à Batoche même tant de filles gracieuses et séduisantes élevées dans les principes de vérité" (1931, 26, 54).

Any lingering doubts that Pierre may still have concerning his brother's duplicity vanish completely when he witnesses Jean bearing a message to a Canadian officer. Knowing that she is "passionnément aimée par un homme qui lui est indifférent," Elsie has easily persuaded Jean to carry letters to her "frère dans l'armée canadienne, un frère qui ignore ce que son père et sa sœur sont devenus, qui les croit morts, sans doute massacrés par les Indiens" (59, 61). The young woman's "frère" turns out to be her fiancé Edward Simpson, a lieutenant with the 90<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Pierre is of course unaware of the reasons for Jean's clandestine visits to the Canadian camp. Consequently, believing his younger brother to be a "traître," a "Judas" who "voulait nous livrer aux Vestes-Rouges", he declares himself a "justicier" and shoots Jean in the back, wounding him severely (1931, 59, 61, 102-3).

The seemingly overwhelming evidence that Jean is collaborating with the enemy leads Dumont to order him to appear before a Métis council to defend himself of the accusation of

treason. When confronted by Riel's "implacable" military lieutenant, the younger La Ronde finally explains the circumstances that brought him in contact with Elsie, maintaining that he has not betrayed his people and that he "n'avait agi ainsi que sûr de la loyauté de cette femme". Like every one else present at the meeting, Dumont accepts the young man's account, saying that it was Elsie, "cette fille aux 'cheveux jaunes' . . . qui était la cause de tout ce trouble. Jean La Ronde n'avait été qu'un instrument entre ses mains; son honnêteté, sa bonne foi étaient hors de cause; seules, sa grande jeunesse et la séduction de cette femme l'avait induit en faute." Before closing the proceedings by absolving the accused, Dumont then demands that Jean swear "sur la croix" to the truth of everything he has just told the council and to pledge "sur le Sauveur que tu ne chercheras jamais à revoir cette fille anglaise" (1931, 137-8).

Dumont's absolution of Jean becomes a pivotal event not only in the life of the younger La Ronde but also that of his brother. Soon after leaving the meeting Pierre encounters Rosalie Guérin, a "belle fille de dix-sept ans" whom he loves deeply but who does not appear to share his affection. However, before he even has time to greet her, Rosalie turns violently on him, shouting: "Assassin! Cain! . . . qui a voulu tuer son frère" (1931, 65-6, 144). Totally unprepared for Rosalie's words, Pierre begins to envy those "hommes que la mort emporterait dans quelques heures, peut-être", an opportunity that does not take long to materialize. In the impending clash between the Canadian forces and the Métis at Batoche, he distinguishes himself in the defence of the village. Following Pierre's heroic retrieval of the Métis flag from the church's steeple, Riel himself entrusts the older of the La Ronde brothers with the safeguard of their people's national emblem. But, after Pierre saves the flag two more times, he perishes in a ferocious battle with the Canadians, his "yeux fixés sur ce drapeau qu'il avait trois fois sauvé" (1931, 144, 191, 234).

Jean has a more pleasant fate. He is gravely wounded as he helps his brother fetch the flag

from the Batoche steeple, a misfortune that leads to his being nursed by his not-so-secret admirer Rosalie. Meanwhile, his romantic feelings toward Elsie have changed completely. As the narrator analyzes the young man's emotions as the latter convalesces, "maintenant, une honte, une confusion si inexprimables d'avoir joué un tel jeu de dupe l'envahissaient que le seul souvenir de miss Clamorgan lui devient subitement odieux." Instead, Jean's thoughts are now devoted solely to Rosalie, the "brave et jolie fille de Bouais-Brûlé" and "[t]ravailleuse numéro un" who loves him unconditionally. In fact, as if to underscore the couple's affection for each other and the continuity of Riel's people, before the end of the novel Jean and Rosalie produce a child of their own (212, 250).

Riel, as should be evident from the above description, stands very much on the periphery of the events depicted in *La tempête sur le fleuve*. Still, the portrait drawn of him in the work is a unique one. Poirier's novel is narrated from the perspective of the vicomte Henri de Vallonges--the author sometimes gives Vallonges's first name as Henry, which is the spelling used in the original edition of the novel--a French adventurer who searches for "expériences d'élevage" in the "territoires presque sauvages du nord-ouest" (1931, 13, 18, 47; 1909, 7). Vallonges, one of whose ancestors was killed by a "balle anglaise" during Wolfe's capture of Quebec in 1759, sees Riel as a major historical figure. For him, the Métis leader is a man "d'une taille supérieure à la moyenne, avec un visage ouvert, dont une barbe noire accentuait encore la chaude pâleur" (1931, 12, 11). Unlike his people, who speak a "langage archaïque" that reminds the visitor of the coarse speech of "ses compatriotes de la basse Normandie," Riel expresses himself in "le plus pur langage français." He is also one of the elect, an individual with a "face tour à tour souffrante et illuminé comme celle d'un prophète" who has created around himself "une atmosphère de loyauté en vérité presque naïve" (1931, 13, 11, 57).

Nevertheless, whether Riel is enlightened or not, the most significant aspect about the Métis leader for Vallonges is the fact that he and his people are definitely French. For instance, when Riel first meets the Frenchman, he introduces himself as the “président du gouvernement provisoire de la petite France de la Saskatchewan.” The narrator, too, identifies the North-West conflict as essentially the repetition of the battle of the Plains of Abraham over a century later. To quote him, March 26, 1885, is the “date mémorable où un petit peuple de descendants de la vieille race française venait de reprendre, au fond du Canada, la lutte interrompue plus d’un siècle auparavant par la mort de Montcalm” (1931, 11, 18). Similarly, the Métis flag that Pierre La Ronde retrieves is described as the “drapeau fleurdelisé” and he as a hero “dont le sang rougit les fleurs de lis” (1931, 227, 231). Indeed, at Batoche the Métis are supposedly defending “tout le passé français” and what their confrontation with the Canadian government ultimately reveals is “la vitalité de notre sang et la permanence de nos traditions.” Or as a local old man tells Vallonges after the latter announces that a group of “compatriotes” will soon arrive from France to help preserve the area for the Métis, “M’sieu, le vicomte, dans ce pays-cite, on est de pauvres Français sauvages, mais on est de ben bons Français tout de même.” To underscore the point, the two men then drink to “l’avenir de la vieille et de la jeune France!” (1931, 230, 252, 342).

Notwithstanding the seemingly wholehearted expressions of solidarity between the French and the Métis, the fact is that the French-speaking world would subsequently exhibit remarkably little interest in Riel and his people. Excepting Poirier, and the one-time Canadian resident Maurice Constantin-Weyer, French writers were never really captivated by the Métis leader. Even Quebec authors would soon cease to ponder the implications of his plight, a development for which Adjutor Rivard may provide an explanation. In his introduction to the first edition of Poirier’s novel, the linguist claims that a “Canadien français” could never have written such a

work. In his words:

Écrit par l'un des nôtres, ce roman serait pris pour une thèse, on chercherait à y voir l'expression d'une opinion politique. La révolte des métis a trop profondément ému la population du Canada, le nom Riel a été mêlé à des luttes trop violentes, et le souvenir est encore trop vif, pour qu'un Canadien français puisse, sans ranimer certaines polémiques et des haines presque éteintes, pour cadre d'un roman les événements de 1885. (v-vi)

Another reason why Quebec writers were not likely to write about Riel, one infers, was not their emotional proximity to the subject but rather their spatial and cultural distance from him. To quote Rivard again, Poirier's novel is "rempli des choses du Canada;--je ne dis pas 'des choses de chez nous', parce que 'chez nous', c'est plutôt la province de Québec, qui se trouve à quelque trois mille kilomètres du nord-ouest." Or as he adds even less equivocally, although "les Canadiens français se sont trop passionnés de la cause des métis," the reality is that "la scène ne se passe pas dans notre vieille province, nous ne sommes pas les acteurs du drame, et les mœurs décrites ne sont pas les nôtres" (v, vi). In other words, the early rhetoric aside, Quebeckers have come to the realization that Riel's cause is not really their own.

Indeed, within a few years of his hanging, Riel virtually disappears from the consciousness of both French- and English-speaking Canadians (Owram 1982, 316-7), suggesting that neither group truly embraced him as its own. Significantly, when the Métis leader does emerge again in the late 1940s, he does so not in Quebec, which would soon begin to plot out its potential future as a separate nation, but in the predominantly English-speaking parts of the country, including the old Orange heartland of Ontario. The post-World War II Riel, however, is radically different from the ethnoreligious martyr of the turn-of-the-century. Perhaps because most of the authors writing

about him are anglophones as well as Protestants, they tend to emphasize not the religious aspects of his struggle but rather the racial, regional, and cultural ones. As Rudy Wiebe has the Métis bard Pierre Falcon state at the end of *The Scorched-Wood People*, an influential novel that will be examined in detail in a subsequent chapter, “There’s no white country can hold a man with a vision like Riel. . . . Canada couldn’t handle that, not Ontario, and not Quebec, they’re just using him against the English. They all think he was cracked, mad” (1977, 351). The new Riel is not only taken outside the Catholic-Protestant prism but also the Quebec-Ontario one. Instead, he is embraced as an ancestor, a First Nations maverick who valiantly opposes both the Eastern-dominated vision of Canada and the homogenization of Western civilization. In Leslie Monkman’s analysis, Riel becomes increasingly seen as “the potential mediator between red and white cultures”. He the ultimate go-between whose “mystical visions led him to dream of a peaceable kingdom in the west and himself as a prophet of the new world” (120).

## Chapter IV

### The Go-between: Riel as a Cultural Mediator

He was the leader of the people,  
And the father of our west;  
He led the battles of the settlers,  
When their voices were suppressed.

Martin Heath (1952)

The theme of Riel as a mediator among different religious, racial, ethnic, and regional groups is a relatively recent one. As we have seen in the previous two chapters, whether English- or French-speaking, most early writers on the North-West conflicts do not display much empathy with Canada's First Nations. Whatever identification they have with the country, it never seems to include its first inhabitants. Consequently, they could not possibly envisage the need to be reconciled with peoples that they are convinced are not only "doomed" but have already finished "de mourir" (Melgund 317; Roquebrune 1924, 9). This is a situation that does not change until well into the twentieth century, more specifically, after World War II. In the aftermath of the cataclysmic events in Europe, English-speaking writers in particular appear to undergo a radical geocultural transformation, shifting their collective allegiance from the Old World to the New. For the first time, they actually begin to portray the First Nations not as an impediment to their

possession of the land but as an integral part of it. That is, as some sort of ancestors. As the poet John Newlove writes, the country is “crammed/ with the ghosts of indians” and “they are all ready/ to be found, the legends/ and the people” (106-7). Interestingly, this nativist genealogical embrace is not effected directly, but through that foremost of European-First Nations hybrids, Riel, who had long anticipated the task.

In his writings, Riel often depicts himself and his people as the natural mediators between their two ancestral groups. The Métis leader actually seems to believe that the New Nation was created precisely to exercise that function, declaring as early as 1870 that the “peuple de la Rivière Rouge a été formé à même ces deux grandes divisions pour leur servir d’intermédiaire.” Or as he notes over a decade later, it is especially the better educated “Halfbreeds who have always up to themselves plaid the most conciliatory role between their white parents and their indian relatives” (I, 92; II, 374). Needless to say, Riel’s vision of the Métis as a human bridge between the First Nations and the European settlers is not without complications, particularly from the former’s perspective. For the one-time divinity student, the standards to which a people should aspire and by which it ought to be judged are invariably European. This is rather apparent in his ethnocultural hierarchy. As Riel states, it is by “their constant communication with the whites [that] the Half-breeds are getting every day more civilized.” In turn, the reason that the “crees are the most civilized indians of the Canadian Northwest,” and superior to the Blackfoot or the Bloods, is that “they have been for a good many years in constant communications with the halfbreeds” (II, 272, 240). Of course the fact that the Métis are not yet as sophisticated as the Europeans does not preclude them from being destined to take possession of the North-West and, in the process, absorb their two parental groups. In other words, Riel’s heady combination of Eurocentrism and Métis nationalism condemns the First Nations to “disparaître sans secousse et

degré par degré” not only biologically, like the European settlers, but also culturally, for the new confederation of Métis nations will be alien to them in both language and religion (II, 409-10).

The first significant aesthetic representation of Riel as a cultural mediator, Roquebrune’s *D’un océan à l’autre*, is actually quite critical, decrying the adverse impact of biocultural métissage on the First Nations. As discussed earlier, the 1924 historical novel is a most unusual work. Unlike the vast majority of Quebec texts on the subject, it is overtly pan-Canadianist in its sympathies, being in fact a paean to the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the historic engineering project that a later writer calls the realization of “le rêve de nos ancêtres français qui ont traversé l’océan pour trouver un passage vers Cathay” (Roux 92). Similarly, it also favours the First Nations over the Métis. The ethnologist narrator Augustin Ménard readily admits that he is professionally interested only in the “vrais Indiens”, not the Métis, who have “dégénéré jusqu’à avoir du sang français ou anglais dans leurs veines.” Or as he states subsequently, he does not have any intention of even visiting the Métis during his field trip to the North-West, since they are a people “sans intérêt. . . qui n’offrent au savant aucun sujet d’étude sérieuse” (1924, 18, 67). Ménard’s antipathy toward Riel’s people, like Roquebrune’s, is informed simultaneously by a fear of miscegenation and a desire to prove to Europeans that Canadians are ethnically pure, that “il n’y a jamais eu d’unions entre les Canadiens et les sauvagesses”--or, at most, “une demi-douzaine” (1924, 21, 9-11). However, it also reflects his conviction that the cultural and religious assimilation of the First Nations is necessarily detrimental to them, for it purportedly destroys their spiritual values without inculcating new ones into them. To quote again Ménard, whose prospective “*Histoire des Mœurs et Coutumes des Races Indiennes de l’Amérique du Nord*” is a “monument considérable d’érudition et d’observation,” he is a “bon catholique” and thus believes that the missionaries were right to “convertir autrefois ces sauvages.” Yet, based on his scientific

research, he cannot help but conclude that the converted “Indiens. . . n’ont plus aucun caractère”, having “perdu leur antique cruauté et leurs mœurs pittoresques” without becoming “civilisés en aucune manière” (1924, 161, 16-7).

Another negative aspect of Aboriginal-Caucasian miscegenation stressed in *D’un océan à l’autre* is the propensity of the products of those unions, the Métis, to embrace the ways of their European ancestors. Certainly the harshest accusations that the (fictitious) Cree chief L’Ours levels at Riel and his people is that they are always betraying their First Nations forebears. As L’Ours berates a Métis guide before shooting him to death, “Quant à toi, métis, traître qui s’attache aux pas des étrangers, tu seras puni comme le seront tous ceux de ta race qui préfèrent la lâcheté à la liberté de nos ancêtres.” The same ethnocultural antagonism is evident in his exchanges with Riel, including an animated one in front of Ménard. During a clandestine visit to Quebec City, likely precipitated by his being pursued by the law for “divers crimes”, L’Ours sells the ethnologist “le blason de sa famille”, which has been tattooed on a piece of “peau humaine.” Later in the North-West, as the two men examine “le double emblème du Soleil et de l’Ours”, Riel gazes at it with “une espèce de terreur”. Noticing Riel’s reaction, L’Ours turns to the Métis leader and scornfully tells him that he has sold the amulet to Ménard because the Quebecker “aime les dieux de notre race que tu dédaignes, toi qui leur préfères des dieux étrangers” (1924, 93, 41-2, 114).

The conflict between L’Ours and Riel is not mainly linguistic or sociopolitical but spiritual. L’Ours, described by Bishop Vital Grandin as an “[e]nnemi de notre religion” who “déteste les missionnaires”, is positive that only with the assistance of New World deities will the First Nations and the Métis be able to arrest the march of European civilization across the North-West. In his words, “C’est par le Soleil que nous vaincrons. . . . Et toi, Riel, si tu veux remporter la victoire

sur les étrangers, il faut que le Soleil soit avec toi. C'est le plus puissant des dieux" (1924, 97, 115). Riel, however, is never truly able to share his Cree ally's cosmology. While he ponders how to "concilier ces antiques croyances avec la foi catholique", it is apparent that he is bound to fail, since, as he admits, "Je crois en Dieu et à tout ce que les Pères m'ont enseigné." Regardless of the Catholic Church's reservations about his religious orthodoxy, Riel is incapable of transcending his Christianity. For instance, after L'Ours asserts that as "un Indien. . . tu dois croire au Soleil" and that the "évêque et les robes noires te trompent", an indignant Riel calls the Cree chief a liar and forbids him to ever again speak like that about the Catholic clergy. Even more significantly, Riel then abruptly ends the debate by dismissing L'Ours as "un païen", suggesting that he has been so alienated from the faith of his First Nations ancestors that he does not even consider it a genuine religion. Later, when Bishop Taché refuses to bless Riel on the eve of the Batoche clash, the Métis leader agrees with L'Ours to chase "les étrangers de notre pays". However, when L'Ours questions if "[t]u chasseras aussi les Pères?" Riel conveniently gallops away before providing an answer (1924, 116, 184-5).

The Métis leader betrays no such debilitating ambivalence about his First Nations heritage in his subsequent representation as a cultural mediator, John Coulter's *Riel* (1950), a play with a preponderant inter-Christian focus. The work generally credited with having initiated the "Riel industry" (Coulter 1980, 283, 268; Anthony 71-2; Moore 1994, 174), Coulter's epic drama had a somewhat inauspicious beginning. It opened on February 17, 1950, at Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum Theatre, a basement lecture hall with almost no stage. Although the multi-character chronicle was produced diligently by Dora Mavor Moore's New Play Society, which touted it as "the first important drama our country has produced out of its own history" (New Play n.p.), the pioneering theatre company had rather limited resources. Therefore, it was forced to entrust the

command of the piece to a first-time director, a young actor and writer named Don Harron who would not be “persuaded. . . to direct a play again” for almost another fifty years (Harron 116). The cast, which comprised future luminaries of the Canadian stage like Harron, Robert Christie, and Moore’s son and helpmate Mavor, was also largely inexperienced at the time. As well, for such a multicultural enterprise, it was predominantly of Anglo-Celtic stock. To quote Mavor Moore, whose role as Riel would mark the beginning of a life-long association with the politician-mystic, “our francophones were not francophone, our Natives were not native” (1984, 177).

Coulter’s *Riel* is obviously an ambitious project, as its varied political aims testify. In the memoirs he published just before his death, the playwright states that he decided to write about Riel because in the story of an individual who comes to believe that God has anointed him the protector of his marginalized people “I saw the shape of a Canadian myth”. His play, however, is not merely the author’s way of dramatizing an obscure chapter of Canadian history but also of incorporating himself into that history, his means of self-Canadianization (Coulter 1980, 261; Garay 283, 309). Born in Belfast in 1888, Coulter immigrated to Canada in 1936 upon marrying the Canadian journalist Olive Clare Primrose. He was already an established author in England and Ireland, having written several radio plays and worked as “managing editor” of John Middleton Murry’s influential journal *The New Adelphi* (Coulter 1980, 79). Thus, soon after settling in Toronto, he “threw himself into the Canadian cultural scene,” becoming a particularly passionate advocate of the idea of a national theatre. Still, as a writer who transplanted himself to a new country at the relatively mature age of forty-eight, he found his efforts to contribute to its emerging theatre constantly foiled by his inability to capture the language around him. In his words, “The dialogue I wrote on one day, thinking it truly imagined in Canadian speech of current idiom, invariably seemed to me next day to be concocted and false”. Consequently, in order to

circumvent the problem, he resolved to “go back in time and write about some Canadian who had been pivotal in a dangerous revolutionary crisis and turning-point in Canadian history”, a search that eventually led him to Riel (Moore 1994, 167; Coulter 1980, 260).

Yet, despite Coulter’s wholehearted effort to help make Canadian theatre “specifically Canadian”, the most striking aspect of *Riel* is what has been called its “Irish accent” (Coulter 1938, 505; Cohen 4; Chris Johnson 187). This Hibernian inflection is particularly evident in both the play’s unrelenting emphasis on Catholic-Protestant sectarianism and the prominence it gives to the Fenian William O’Donoghue, an Irish-born mathematics teacher at Saint Boniface College who actively promoted the annexation of Red River by the United States. *Riel* is divided in two parts, the first dealing with the events of 1869-70 and the second with those of 1885. The first section opens at Riel’s home. The young Métis has gone riding on the prairie, as his mother says he is wont “when he must decide something,” and several armed supporters impatiently await his return. While they do, an unidentified Priest appeals to O’Donoghue, as “one of the few men of education here”, to attempt to curb his leader’s rhetoric and “restrain this madness.” However, the Fenian promptly informs the cleric that he is not exactly the ideal person to control Riel or any other would-be revolutionary, since “I’m the maddest of the mad myself--if any of us *are* mad!” Indeed, as O’Donoghue elaborates, his only disagreement with Riel is that the latter’s “madness isn’t mad enough. He’s for holding the North-West but under protection of the British flag. I’m for holding it under the protection of our own flag, our own arms” (1950, 1-2).

The conflict between Riel and O’Donoghue, which dominates the Red River portion of the play, is precipitated less by any specific event in the Settlement’s history than by the two men’s disparate perceptions of Great Britain. Shaped by his national history, O’Donoghue is simply incapable of trusting his homeland’s oppressors. As he explains to the Priest why the Canadian

surveyors must be stopped, “If we tolerate them Canadians will swarm in after them in thousands. They’ll grab both us and ours. They’ll lay us under tribute. Tax us! Bleed us white! . . . We won’t let Canada do to us what England did to Ireland. . . .” Riel, in contrast, has a far less visceral view of the Empire and superpowers in general. Unlike O’Donoghue, he does not believe that what “any big over-blown nation in history does to a small neighbour [is]--grab it! Gobble it up!” Quite the opposite, the reason he is confident about Red River’s ability to withstand any attacks by its covetous neighbours to the east and south is that it has the political and military support of Great Britain, which he regards not as a predator on his land and people but rather as their protector. As Riel adds, “We are not yet strong enough to stand on our two legs without her” (1950, 3, 26).

Considering the ideological chasm between Riel and O’Donoghue, it is not surprising that they would have a major confrontation, which they do over the flying of the Union Jack. After the Métis capture Fort Garry from the Hudson’s Bay Company, O’Donoghue decides to mark the occasion by pulling down the British “rag” and replacing it with “our own flag--fleur-de-lis and shamrock”. The moment Riel learns of the Fenian’s unauthorized action, he becomes enraged over the “nonsense” for which “I should have you put in irons.” Even when O’Donoghue attempts to justify himself by saying that he raised the green-and-white banner to mark “our independence and integrity as a people”, Riel does not relent in his criticism (1950, 23, 24, 25). While agreeing that the people of Red River are not British, he contends not only that they are British subjects but “*must* be.” In his words, which ironically echo the colonial dependency of Macdonald’s famous last address to the people of Canada, “A British subject I was born--a British subject, I will die” (1891, 777) :

Do you know why? So three million British will have the honour of protecting us when we cannot protect ourselves.

.....

To protect us against whoever would march in to grab and conquer even if the would-be grabber is Canada--or the U.S.A. That is why we call England--Mother Country. (1950, 25-6)

O'Donoghue, though, remains unconvinced. When the Irishman persists that it is for the Métis Council and not Riel to decide which flag should fly over Fort Garry, the latter replies unequivocally, "It is decided. I am the Council." Then, as if to underscore his authority, he orders that the green-and-white flag be lowered and the Union Jack raised in its place and that everyone join him in shouting "God save the Queen" (1950, 26-7).

With O'Donoghue finally silenced if not quite neutralized, Riel seems destined to emerge victorious in his quest to lead Red River. That is certainly the impression created when even the Prime Minister characterizes him as an "extraordinary person. . . willing to enter Confederation with us and become a province--on Riel's terms, of course." However, the Métis leader's prospects suffer a fatal setback as a consequence of another aspect of the Catholic-Protestant warfare, his perplexing treatment of Tom Scott. Described in the stage directions as a "*surlly, aggressive, fanatical-looking man*", Coulter's Scott is clearly a demonic figure. In the very first scene in which he appears he not only calls a group of Métis "a pack o' mongrel Papishes" but then challenges them all to fight, one at a time. Later when he meets Riel, who is surrounded by guards, Scott "*strikes*" him (1950, 43, 11-2, 15). Yet, even more puzzling than the Orangeman's behaviour is the Métis leader's response to the man that Riel's mother calls "the devil, the devil." After Scott refuses "to swear an oath of full loyalty" to his government, Riel has the Ontarian duly tried and executed for the apparent crime of being "a windbag" (Coulter 1950, 15, 34; O Broin 137). Another possibility of course is that Scott is killed not for political but religious reasons. As

Riel confides to the Priest, “He is evil. Evil. I tell you. . . Satan is in him. He is Satan. He is Anti-Christ.” Or as the Priest retorts, more ominously, “Perhaps having you execute him is Satan’s means to wreck your mission” (1950, 35).

Although Riel does not recognize it immediately, his role in the execution of Scott will have grave repercussions for his political career. Responding to public opinion particularly in his home province of Ontario, Macdonald sends a military expedition under the British Colonel Garnet Wolseley “to keep order” at Red River until a new lieutenant-governor takes over from the Métis provisional government. A seemingly innocent Riel prepares to welcome the soldiers, even organizing a “reception” in their honour (1950, 46, 50). But when he learns that Wolseley’s troops have not come to maintain the peace but rather to avenge Scott’s death, he realizes that he has been outmanoeuvred by his foes. Feeling a tremendous sense of betrayal, the “noble patriot” for the first time actually arms himself and vows not to be taken by the enemy. After defending the British Empire so passionately to O’Donoghue, Riel also concedes that he was wrong, declaring: “I am not now a--loyal subject of Her Majesty.” Nevertheless, even in the midst of his greatest public humiliation, he accepts Bishop Taché’s advice that the best way he can serve his people is by leaving the country and waiting for “God’s time” in exile (1950, 54, 56, 59-60).

Now married and the father of two children, Riel is still living in exile fifteen years later when he learns of his people’s continuing troubles in the Canadian North-West and of their desire to have him “lead them” again. In spite of his wife’s opposition to his leaving their Montana home, which she says is now “[y]our country”, Riel decides to heed his people’s call for help. Or more precisely, he is commanded to do so. As he announces to Marguerite, “God has told me. I have asked God. I have waited fifteen years and now it is God’s time. I am to go” (1950, 68, 69). Yet, notwithstanding its divine sanction, Riel’s mission is destined to be short-lived. Almost as

soon as he incites the Métis and their First Nations allies to “take up arms” against the Canadian forces, he surrenders to those same forces. In fact, most of the second part of Coulter’s play is devoted not to the military confrontation at Batoche but to the battle’s aftermath and Riel’s subsequent trial, which he believes will provide him with a forum to disseminate “the just demands and grievances of my people” (1950, 71, 80, 82). For example, it is from his testimony to the victorious General Frederick Middleton that one learns that Riel’s order for his supporters to attack and disarm the Canadian volunteers was merely a political ploy, an attempt to force “those politicians there in Ottawa at last. . . to listen and deal honourably with us. . . .” Likewise, it is also then that he explains that he has come to the South Saskatchewan as a mediator committed to defend the rights of all local inhabitants. As Riel informs the veteran British soldier, his struggle is on behalf of “[m]y people here in the North-West, all, all, and not the Métis only”, for “Métis and whites, all have grievances, foul, festering, suppurating sores of grievances that *smell*, and poison the body of society!” Paradoxically, the collectivity that Riel succeeds in unifying is not his own people but the group that has just defeated them, the Canadians. To quote Macdonald, “this wretch Riel is actually forcing us to take responsibility and govern Canada. How odd! The outlaw once more shapes the law. Henceforth, Louis Riel’s name is scribbled across a chapter of our Constitutional Law!” Or as the Prime Minister adds, the Métis leader “goes down to history as. . . one of the mortal instruments that shaped our destiny!” a sentiment somewhat qualified by the fact that he has just announced Riel’s execution with the comment, “he’s a gone coon” (1950, 84, 85, 130-1).

There are several interesting elements in Coulter’s *Riel*, not the least of which is the play’s dramatization of the problematic nature of its protagonist’s place in Canadian history. Mavor Moore has commended the author for portraying “Riel with Jovian impartiality” (1994, 177), but

this is not quite so. As one can see from the characterization of the Riel-O'Donoghue relationship and the demonization of Scott, *Riel* is transparently biased in favour of its eponymous hero. It is true that Coulter does not completely ignore the Métis leader's intolerance, his proclivity to brand anyone who does not support him a "traitor" and to threaten to strike his opponents "down--without warning or mercy." Still, there is no avoiding the author's determination to accentuate his protagonist's positive qualities, even at the price of reversing the historical record. For instance, in the flag incident, the historical Riel did not oppose O'Donoghue but rather joined him in replacing the Union Jack with the Métis standard (Coulter 1950, 19; Stanley 1963, 77). Similarly, both the politician-mystic's writings and his political aims suggest that he was not overly enthusiastic about joining Confederation. Yet, the overall picture that Coulter paints of Riel is that of a patriotic and peaceable leader, a pious individual who embraces violence only after every other option fails. Particularly when juxtaposed to the Fenian O'Donoghue and the Orangeman Scott, with their distinct but equally extreme visions of the world, the Métis leader emerges as nothing less than the personification of common sense and moderation, the born-conciliator who would unify even traditional enemies.

Perhaps reflecting Coulter's awareness of being a Protestant writing about a Catholic--"the covert resentment of my intrusion" on another religion (1980, 265)--the playwright is quite partisan toward the Catholic Church. The most conspicuous effect of this partiality is that he conflates the Church's asymmetrical responses to the two North-West conflicts. The Catholic clergy played an admittedly ambiguous role in 1885, both championing Riel's cause and fearing his theological unorthodoxy, what has been called his "indigenized Catholicism" (Huel 15; Morisset 1987, 62). That, however, was not at all the case in 1869-70, when the Church actively supported the young leader to the point of forming his only "true constituency" (Ens 116). Still,

Coulter portrays the Red River clergy as a pacifying force, spiritual advisors who constantly strive to persuade Riel to modulate his rhetoric and to recognize that the forcible seizure of the colony's government is bound to have "the most serious consequences" (1950, 2). Noticeably, in a play with such a profusion of characters, Coulter does not include Father Noël Ritchot, the politically engaged Saint Norbert pastor whom the young Riel considered his spiritual guide, a "nouvel Aaron" (II, 81; Siggins 91-2). Moreover, when he does address any controversial aspect of the Catholic clergy's involvement in the North-West crises, he fails to pursue it in any detail. Thus, Coulter ascribes Riel's decision to travel to Saskatchewan largely to a letter he receives from Father Alexis André, telling the Métis leader that he is "the most popular man with all the people here" and that there "will be great disappointment if you do not come." But two short scenes later, without showing any clash between Riel and the clergy, the playwright has a generic Priest urging the politician-mystic to lay down his arms and abandon his "blind folly" (1950, 68, 73). Indeed, one cannot help but deduce that Coulter's conscious or unconscious fear of being perceived as anti-Catholic contributes immeasurably to his play's most debilitating flaw, its lack of drama.

Coulter's *Riel* has elicited two dominant responses. For some critics, such as Moore at the time of the original production, it is "the most important Canadian play to date" (qtd. in Harron 113). Herbert Whittaker, too, deems it a major theatrical and political "achievement. . . , especially impressive to Canadians who have seen their history only through clouds of dust" (22). Other critics, on the other hand, find Coulter's work excessively static, lacking in point of view. To quote Vincent Tovell, "The play presents many opinions about Riel and a good deal of evidence concerning him; it records him fully; but it does not interpret him" (272-3). Or as Doris Mosdell asserts, *Riel* is not a historical tragedy but a pageant, "a series of disconnected tableaux:

no dramatic theme emerges, no fusing, driving conception behind the collection of vignettes and narrative bridges” (15). Even Moore, who from the beginning had some reservations about the text for ignoring the “private” Riel, ultimately judges it theatrically wanting. The polymath actor, writer, and cultural bureaucrat states that he agreed to write a libretto for an opera about the Métis leader because he felt that Coulter’s play “lacked the incandescence to serve as a metaphor for Canada.” However, he somewhat self-servingly attributes this failure not so much to the playwright as to his work’s genre, since presumably “only an operatic treatment could do justice to the soaring theme” (Coulter 1949, 2; Moore 1994, 312).

The theatre scholar Chris Johnson, though, has suggested that Coulter’s “deficiencies in characterization” are partly explained by the fact that he was “addressing an audience. . . not particularly familiar with the story he was telling” and thus had “to devote a good deal of time to acquainting his audience with the sequence of historical events” (186). While there is much truth to this observation, another possibility is that the author’s equivocation about Riel reflects both his profound ambivalence toward his subject and his work’s conflicting aims, the celebration of Canadian history through someone who is either a victim of Canadian expansionism or an enemy of Canada. In a most revealing letter to Dora Mavor Moore in 1949, attempting to persuade her to stage some of his plays, Coulter describes *Riel* as “a theatre piece on the public life” of the Métis leader. Yet, even as he strives to rectify the “intolerable situation” of being a playwright in Canada and not being able to contribute to the country’s developing theatre, he concedes that “Riel’s private life may be more interesting”, adding that he is “already busy trying to make a simplified version, with a good deal of Riel’s private complexities interfused” (1949, 1-2). Coulter’s apparent discomfort about the Métis leader’s public life is twofold. First, although he considers the politician-mystic’s story an archetypal Canadian one, he also believes “that but for

the accident of history, which found him where he was, when he was, he should have lived and died and never again be heard of, an irascible, discontented, religious and political fanatic” (1980, 261). That is, Riel is not an intrinsically dramatic or significant figure. Or to quote another writer, he does not move history, but is “moved into it”; he is a “man from Winnipeg” (Davey 51). More significantly, Coulter seems to realize that his protagonist is at war with the country whose past the author wishes to celebrate. If there is a predatory power in Coulter’s play it is obviously Canada, and for that reason Riel has to oppose it. In other words, Riel is a most problematic Canadian icon. From a Canadian perspective, he is at best a negative hero, someone who becomes a patriot by opposing Canada and forcing it to define itself (Morisset 1985a; D. Morton 1992, 49; Braz 1997).

Curiously, Coulter tends to downplay Riel’s Canadian patriotism in the two other plays he devotes to the Métis leader. Several years after the landmark production of *Riel*, the author received a Canada Council grant to write two more dramatic works about “two other Canadian subjects of historical and theatrical importance”, thus forming a trilogy. However, since he “found no subjects with anything like the dramatic potential of. . . my half-mythical, rebel half-breed, my John Brown of the North”, he decided instead to adapt them from his earlier work (Coulter 1980, 271). The first of these plays, *The Crime of Louis Riel* (1966), appears to be the “simplified version” of *Riel* that Coulter mentions in his letter to Dora Mavor Moore, yet it has a distinctly international flavour. As he writes in the preface, the piece “is about the degree to which I see the Metis leader and the rebellions which he led as precursors of later and present uprisings all over the world, particularly the so-called Third World” (1949, 2; 1966, n.p.). The second play, *The Trial of Louis Riel* (1967), is basically an edited version of the Regina judicial transcripts. Staged annually since 1967 in the Saskatchewan capital, whose Chamber of Commerce commissioned it

“frankly as a tourist attraction” (Coulter 1980, 271), the work focuses primarily on Riel’s mental state toward the end of his life.

In contrast to Coulter’s later plays, there is little conflict about either Riel’s Canadianness or his effect on history in Martin Heath’s “Louis Riel” (1952). Published in the Communist magazine “New Frontiers,” the song arguably constitutes the first unadulterated apotheosis of the subject as a pan-Canadian hero. To quote its opening stanza:

In our early western story  
Riel fought to have men free,  
Shared his heart with white and Metis,  
In the cause of democracy.  
His the voice of the Red River,  
His the spirit of our folk,  
When they banded all together  
To defeat a tyrant’s yoke. (9)

Heath does not merely exalt Riel but also indicts his opponents. As the author writes in a chorus that is repeated three times, those individuals who hanged the Métis leader for “the crime/ . . . of standing up for justice” today are “forgotten men,/ But to those who fight for freedom,/ Louis Riel lives again.” Or as Heath concludes, Riel has won “a people’s fame” (9).

The question of Riel’s status as a Canadian hero, though, is central to Jean-Louis Roux’s *Bois-Brûlés* (1968). Written by a distinguished actor and theatre director--as well as a political figure whose term as lieutenant-governor of Quebec ended prematurely following his admission of having worn a “croix gammée” during his university years (Chartrand 17)--it was originally staged by Montreal’s Théâtre du nouveau monde. *Bois-Brûlés*, which is subtitled “reportage épique,”

bears many similarities to Coulter's *Riel*. Like the earlier play, it is divided into two parts, the first exploring the troubles at Red River and the second the ones at Batoche. Likewise, as its subtitle suggests, it too has a multitude of characters and incidents. Indeed, Roux's play is not just about Riel but the whole Métis nation. To quote the playwright's foreword, the reason he gives his work a collective title is to "indiquer que si la figure centrale en est Riel, ses compatriotes, son peuple, 'son sang' n'en constituent pas moins un des personnages principaux. Je ne veux pas que raconter l'histoire d'un homme, mais également chanter la saga de la nation métis [sic]" (10).

Nevertheless, there are also major differences between *Bois-Brûlés* and *Riel*. The most obvious of these is the fact that Roux has his play partly narrated by Pierre Falcon, something Rudy Wiebe would emulate a decade later in *The Scorched-Wood People*. Falcon, who lived from 1793 to 1876, is not reported to have played any significant role at Red River and was of course long dead before the crisis on the South Saskatchewan (Complin 51-2). Thus, his inclusion in a work about the two conflicts is necessarily anachronistic. Yet Roux's "exercise of the dramatist's licence" is not without merit, for it enables him to contextualize the play (Chris Johnson 188). It is through the beloved Métis bard, the first poet to sing "la gloire de tous les Bois-Brûlés", that he is able to inform his audience about the then largely unknown Riders of the Plains and their unique way of life. As the author has Falcon explain, the Métis are a nation whose love of "la chasse aux buffles" and of "la liberté de la vaste plaine", as opposed to agriculture and other sedentary pursuits, makes them "le peuple le plus heureux de la terre" (Falcon 7; Roux 19). Or at least it did until recently. In the minstrel's somewhat romantic words, both internal and external forces are now conspiring against his people:

petit à petit, nous avons appris les charmes de la civilisation blanche: l'appât au gain, l'envie, le sens jaloux de la propriété. Les Blancs nous ont appris que nous

étions leurs inférieurs. Ils nous ont appris que la liberté connaissait des frontières.  
Et depuis, nous ne sommes plus le peuple le plus heureux de la terre. Nous ne  
sommes même plus maîtres de notre destin. (21)

Falcon illustrates the calamitous change in his people's fortunes, their loss of control over their collective fate, by having the Hudson's Bay Company, England, Canada, and the United States haggling over the Métis as if they were cattle. To quote him again, "Qui dit mieux? Qui dit pire? Une fois; deux fois, trois fois. . . Vendus!" (21)

Another notable difference between *Bois-Brûlés* and *Riel* is in the former's depiction of Scott. Roux has been praised for his "remarkable fairness to the English-speaking side" (Chris Johnson 189), but this definitely does not include the controversial Ontarian. Like most other post-World War II writers on Riel, Coulter deals with the always sensitive Scott episode by demonizing the Irish-born settler as some sort of Orange devil. Roux goes further. Not content to just portray Scott as evil, he also makes him a cold-blooded murderer. After the Métis takeover of Fort Garry, several members of the Canadian Party congregate at John Christian Schultz's store to plot strategy against the "gouvernement rebelle." As they do, a mentally-retarded Métis youth named Norbert Parisien happens to wander toward the compound, and Scott shoots him to death from within the store, on the pretext that Parisien is "un espion." The Orangeman, who loudly proclaims that "[j]amais un sang-mêlé oserait toucher à un cheveu d'un Anglais", is soon arrested, and promptly hits Riel in the face. A Métis fighter responds to Scott's insolence by threatening to kill him, but his leader intervenes and orders that even such a brigand "doit être jugé légalement" (56, 61, 66-7). However, Riel's action is not as magnanimous as it first seems, for before long he too begins calling for Scott's head, but not for the reasons one would typically expect.

In spite of the fact that he deliberately rewrites history to turn Scott into a killer, Roux proceeds to characterize Riel in a way that suggests that the politician-mystic's motivation for having Scott executed is only tangentially connected to his antagonist. Coulter's Riel, for instance, candidly states that the Orangeman must die because "it is necessary to have acceptance here of our authority." Roux's too makes a similar admission, declaring that "[i]l faut un exemple; sinon plus personne n'aura de respect pour moi" (Coulter 1950, 36; Roux 71). But the Métis leader then traces his need for retribution to another event, an earlier trauma whose scars clearly have not yet healed. As Riel relates to his mother:

Quand j'étais à Montréal, je suis tombé amoureux d'une jeune fille. J'ai voulu l'épouser; mais, lorsque ses parents on appris que j'avais du sang indien, dans les veines, ils ont refusé leur consentement. Un Métis! Un sale Métis! Ce n'était pas assez bon pour leur fille à peau blanche. Je me suis juré qu'un jour, je forcerais le respect des Canadiens pour les Métis. Les sales Métis! Les sales Métis, tout le monde apprendra à les respecter: Thomas Scott, le premier. (72)

That is, Riel is determined to ensure that Scott will die not so much because he is a "meurtrier sanguinaire" (67) but in order to show the world that the Métis will no longer acquiesce silently to their oppression. Or, to phrase it differently, regardless of his culpability, the Orangeman is a scapegoat for both Anglo-Protestant and Franco-Catholic chauvinism, particularly the racially-motivated rejection of Riel as a prospective son-in-law by Marie-Julie Guernon's parents.

A third unique aspect of *Bois-Brûlés* is its treatment of the Catholic Church. Roux's Riel is not nearly as pious as Coulter's who, before he even appears on stage, is reported to be having one of his "solitary pow-wows with the Almighty." The Quebec playwright, on the other hand, makes his protagonist a far more political figure, first introducing him as the leader of the group

of Métis that stops the Canadian surveyors (Coulter 1950, 1; Roux 31). Still, when the Church makes its presence felt, it does not do so very favourably. As Bishop Taché leaves his residence soon after returning from an apostolic visit to Rome that had kept him away from Red River during the seizure of Fort Garry, he is informed by an armed Métis posse that “vous êtes confiné à l’intérieur de votre Palais. Ordre du Président.” With some effort, the Saint Boniface prelate manages to obtain an audience with his one-time protégé, but the meeting is not successful. While Taché reprimands Riel for taking “armes contre l’autorité établie,” the latter seems unimpressed. Riel not only confesses that he is uncertain whether he is addressing a religious representative or a “délégué” of the Canadian government but then tells the visitor unequivocally: “Je ne veux pas vous traiter en ennemi, Monseigneur; je veux seulement établir clairement qu’il n’y a--ici--qu’un seul chef politique des Métis: c’est moi” (75, 76-7, 80). Indeed, what the encounter between Taché and Riel encapsulates is the essentially political nature of the conflict between the young politician and the clergy, the fact that they are fighting less for the souls of the Métis than for their hearts and minds.

There are contradictions in Roux’s characterization of the relationship between Riel and the Catholic Church. For instance, at the same time that the Métis leader keeps Taché’s residence under “garde”, one of Taché’s own priests, Father Ritchot, is negotiating with Ottawa on behalf of the Red River government (82, 88). Yet what one cannot help but notice in *Bois-Brûlés* is that Riel and the clergy are engaged in an open power struggle, a contest in which spiritual concerns play a surprisingly inconsequential role. This political strife becomes especially pronounced in 1885. Almost as soon as Riel arrives in Batoche, Father André denounces him as a negative influence whose “présence ne peut qu’exciter la population, la pousser à commettre des actes de violence irréparables.” The French missionary’s rationale is that the legal-political conditions have

changed in fundamental ways since 1869-70, for the Métis are no longer organizing a “résistance contre une invasion étrangère” but are now “bel et bien en territoire canadien.” Therefore, André duly informs Riel that, if he persists with his “propos incendiaires”, “le clergé de la Saskatchewan se verrait dans l’obligation de vous combattre” (133).

One of the ways in which André opposes Riel is by negotiating directly with Ottawa, a tactic that really amounts to a repudiation of the Métis leader. André, who claims that his only objective is “de voir notre peuple tranquille et satisfait”, begins by informing Macdonald about Riel’s activities and warning the Prime Minister that his government’s general unresponsiveness to Métis grievances is bound to make the returnee ever more popular with his people. Then, at Macdonald’s instigation, the missionary attempts to bribe Riel to return to Montana, where he could be “fort utile” to his cause. However, the latter refuses the “fourbe”, declaring somewhat ambiguously that “Louis Riel vaut plus de mille dollars par année.” André once again contacts Ottawa but, when he fails to persuade the Prime Minister to pay the “cinq ou six milles dollars” that he believes “régleraient la question”, he proceeds to battle Riel by branding him an apostate, a false “Josué”. In André’s fiery words to his parishioners, “Vous êtes aveugles! Regardez-le! Regardez-le bien: c’est l’antéchrist; nul autre que l’antéchrist; l’antéchrist en personne!” (136-7, 144, 151).

In an effort to gain control of the situation, André threatens to excommunicate anyone who agrees to take arms against Canada, a warning Riel himself dismisses derisively as evidence of clerical jealousy of his political influence, the fact that “Dieu m’a confié le salut de la nation Métis [sic].” Most of the Métis appear to agree with the former exile, for they soon respond to his call to “défendre nos droits par les armes--s’il le faut” (151-2, 157). Seemingly rejected by the people he has crossed half the world to serve, a people whose “sang” Dumont pointedly reminds

him he does not share, André watches helplessly as his flock prepares to face the Canadian forces. Certain that this is a confrontation the Métis cannot win, he concludes that the wisest course is to “écourter la bataille. Plus l’engagement sera rapide et décisif, moins il y aura de sang répandu.” Thus, he asks Charles Nolin to go to the Canadian camp and inform General Middleton that “on est moins de cent cinquante” (155, 168-9, 174-5).

Whether André’s decision to reveal the number of Métis fighters to the enemy constitutes treason, as members of the community’s political and intellectual elite would charge decades later (Comité historique 427; Adams 1989, 30, 33), of course depends on how one judges the events of 1885. For Riel, the decision to arm the Métis is simply “une démonstration. Rien d’autre qu’une démonstration.” As he explains to the missionary, “Nous n’aurons pas un coup de feu à tirer. Balayée, la commission d’enquête! Craignant le pire, le gouvernement va passer à l’action immédiatement.” André, however, perceives the strategy as a suicidal mission whose only possible outcome is not just the destruction of a people but also the abandonment of “les chemins de la liberté” (149, 169). Nonetheless, whether misguided or prescient, what André’s action at Batoche underlines is the unequal relationship between the Catholic clergy and the Métis. This political disparity is seldom more conspicuous than near the end of the play. After Riel’s trial, as the Métis leader awaits word of an Ottawa clemency that will not come, André visits him in his cell and a reconciliation of sorts takes place between the two men. Cognizant that his death is imminent, Riel makes overtures to André about returning to the Church, but is reluctant to admit that he is guilty of any “hérésies”. The missionary, though, insists that Riel must “[a]bjurez vos erreurs”, and at last Riel assents, declaring solemnly: “Je désire, de tout cœur, retourner dans le sein de notre Mère, la Sainte Eglise catholique et romaine, qui m’a vu naître et grandir. . . .”. Tellingly--as in history, although administered by a different priest--Riel’s recantation is not uttered directly by

the penitent but rather is dictated to him by André (Roux 194-5; *Riel* III, 64-72). That is, even the contents of the dying man's confession of faith are determined by the Catholic Church.

*Bois-Brûlés* is obviously not a flawless work. Like Coulter's *Riel*, it attempts to examine the whole of its protagonist's career, and needless to say fails. Since there are so many characters and incidents, they are often mere "esquisses" (Dassylva 169). Even the Métis leader's behaviour at times seems psychologically unmotivated. For example, Riel is quite lucid throughout most of the first part, explaining that he must stop the Canadian surveyors because if the Métis allow Canada to take possession of their land without any conditions, this will be simply the first of many losses. To quote him, "Nous déloger de nos terres? Pourquoi pas, ensuite, nous défendre de parler notre langue maternelle et d'exercer la religion de notre choix? Pourquoi pas nous obliger à changer notre façon de vivre?" (37). Later, he decides to keep Taché under house arrest not only because he believes there can be only one leader of the Métis but also because he suspects the bishop of duplicity, of being an agent for Ottawa, a suspicion that appears to be confirmed when Taché conspires with Macdonald to send him into exile. Yet, by the end of the segment, Riel suddenly begins to shout that he has no fear of his enemies, for he is under the protection not just of God but also of the "comte de Chambord, de France" and of "Don Carlos, d'Espagne" (76, 101, 112).

Again like Coulter's *Riel*, Roux's play also betrays a discernible ambivalence about its central character, particularly his state of mind. As shown, the playwright depicts the Catholic Church as being extremely antagonistic toward Riel. However, the clergy's attitude becomes quite understandable if the Métis leader happens to be an apostate, which the text suggests he probably is. For instance, when Father André refuses to allow armed Métis to gather in "assemblée" at Batoche, Riel breaks ranks not just with the missionary but with the Church itself, setting himself

as an alternate institution. In Riel's words to his community, "les prêtres ne font pas la religion. Il [André] vous refuse les sacrements? Venez à moi! La vieille Eglise romaine vous rejette de son sein? Venez à moi! Je suis votre prophète; je suis le prophète du Nouveau Monde! Venez à moi!" Or as he adds immediately after, "Je serai le prêtre de votre religion" (150, 152). Similarly, Roux also seems equivocal about his protagonist's politics. The author begins with an openly pro-Riel stance, portraying him as a natural leader acclaimed almost unanimously by his people as "chef", and thus minimizing the diversity of political views within the Métis community at Red River (38; Ens 121-3). Yet, gradually, indications appear in the text that Riel may not be the utterly positive figure that the work first suggests. To begin with, he is devoid of irony to the point of hypocrisy. Only moments after condemning Scott to death for rather tenuous reasons, he states that the North-West will become a beacon for all "les peuples opprimés du monde", a place where "on sait faire respecter la liberté." In spite of his frequent assertions about being motivated solely by the welfare of his people, he is also rather intolerant of any questioning of his authority, since he sees himself as "mon peuple. Je parle pour mon peuple." Perhaps most critically for a political leader who steers his people into an armed confrontation with a mightier force, Riel may not be rational, having no expectations of defeating the enemy except through "un miracle" (73, 72, 177).

Nonetheless, one of Roux's unequivocal achievements in *Bois-Brûlés* is the fact that his play ultimately respects Riel's national specificity as a Métis. The playwright is not adverse to emphasizing his protagonist's purported desire to unify Canadians, such as the unlikely message he writes to welcome the first lieutenant-governor of the new province of Manitoba, expressing the hope that "Canadiens de toutes origins pourront y vivre paisiblement, dans un accord parfait et dans une union prospère" (103). Still, Roux's Riel remains unmistakably Other, an alterity that

has not always been appreciated, especially in Quebec. To quote one critic, with his ambiguous portrait of the “héros de la liberté et illuminé,” the author fails to enable Quebec audiences to “lire leur propre histoire à travers celle des Métis” (Greffard 108). Yet, judging by the story enacted in *Bois-Brûlés*, this seems to be less Roux’s failure than a fair recapitulation of a not so glorious historical reality. After all, even from a Quebec perspective, Riel is either a rebel against the Church or a victim of anti-First Nations racism, not just Anglo-Protestant racism but also Franco-Catholic. In other words, the Métis leader cannot be easily incorporated into the larger Canadian family, including Quebec, for his presence necessarily highlights negative aspects of its collective past.

If Dorothy Livesay ever had any question about Riel’s Canadian patriotism, or about the possible conflict between Canadian and Métis nationalisms, she shows little awareness of it in “Prophet of the New World: A Poem for Voices” (1972). In her essay “The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre,” Livesay writes that the Canadian long poem could be characterized as a writer’s “conscious attempt to create a dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet.” She also states that the genre has a strong didactic component, aiming less to narrate a tale than to “illustrate a precept” (1971, 267, 269). The opening stanzas of “Prophet of the New World,” sung by a chorus, leave little doubt as to the “precept” that the author wishes to exemplify:

Who is he that comes, treading on hope  
 Indian footed? Remembering how  
 when the lean rock pulls winter on its face  
 natives of the plains know time is near  
 to hunt the buffalo for hides, for meat

and in thin bush to trap the beaver skin?

Who is it with Ireland in his name

and Scandinavian humour in his veins?

What poet, or what dreamer, caught

in music of his own imagining? (1972, 148)

The answer is of course the devout and filial Riel, “with French vowels on his tongue/ *l’amour de dieu* [sic] within his heart”, the model young man whom his mother proudly calls “a hunter, yet a dreamer” (1972, 148).

Livesay’s identification with Riel is so complete that it has been suggested that he is her “spiritual kinsman” and that poet and subject “speak as one.” It is certainly difficult to conceive of a more adulatory portrait of the Métis leader than the one painted in “Prophet of the New World,” a work apparently begun in the mid-1940s and based on two radio plays, “Red River-- 1869” and “Flags for Canada” (Tiessen and Tiessen 325, 315; Livesay 1972, 147). While Livesay’s Riel is a political figure, he is very much driven by spiritual concerns. More specifically, he is an individual torn between two dreams. In one dream, a celestial voice informs him that his rudderless people have anointed him as their leader. Yet, despite the fact that he derives his “authority” solely from his people, he is to represent not just them but presumably also God. As the unidentified heavenly voice tells him, “From the flock you must go out, there where my children are/ as speechmaker and peacemaker; you must be voice/ for them, for Me.” In the other dream, Riel imagines that he wrestles in a wood with God, “my Lord/ with flaming tomahawk, his mind afire,” and “I, crying to be known/ by him, delivering fierce blows for truth”. Riel is certain that he sees the Almighty’s “blood spurt and bruises burst like flowers” but ultimately succumbs

to his adversary. Still, in a way, he emerges victorious, for as a consequence of his bout with God he discovers the purpose of his worldly mission: "Here on this earth to fight for freedom's light,/ here in this flowered land to end the hate" (1972, 149-50).

The reason Riel is able to decipher his dreams is that he is inspired, spiritually as well as poetically. Indeed, even his purported dementia is supposed to be a reflection of his artistic creativity--or, possibly, of his mixed heritage--since:

..... Madness is  
 the meat of poetry; and every poet's mad  
 who has a message burning in his bowels.  
 Say I am mad; say that the slowly turning world  
 rifled with hate, red skin against white  
 fathers perverting sons, and all of nature made  
 into a kitchen midden for man's wasteful heart--  
 call these things *sane*? and their existence, *bliss*?  
 Still I am mad, and who would destroy and burn  
 the shame of racial hate; I, the half-caste  
 neither white nor brown, am therefore mad:  
 more human, less possessed of bigotry  
 nearer, I feel, to the great God who came  
 to be amongst us, flesh, to feel  
 the animal passions of this creature, man. (1972, 151)

In any case, whether it signifies that he is a wordsmith or of mixed race, Riel's alleged madness is definitely a positive force. This is made explicit when he ends the stanza by asking God to make

him even more mad, so that he can transcend “the barriers of everyday” and his soul “forever be on fire/ a comet flashing faith upon the world” (1972, 151).

Livesay’s picture of Riel in “Prophet of the New World” is obviously both idealistic and idealized. Her object in the poem is not just to narrate a tale about the architect of the two North-West conflicts but to eulogize him, to rehabilitate his public image. However, she is able to do so only by providing a rather idiosyncratic view of history. For instance, the author has her protagonist abandoning his sacerdotal studies the moment he learns that his father has died and that his people wish him to lead them. She thus ignores not only the Guernon affair, which forms the kernel of Roux’s interpretation of the Métis leader in *Bois-Brûlés*, but also the fact that two years elapse between the death of Riel’s father and the young man’s return to Red River. Similarly, she seems to attribute Riel’s leadership in 1869-70 to divine forces, glossing over both her hero’s political ambition and the roles played by other individuals and institutions in the community, not least the Catholic Church. Most conspicuously, when Livesay briefly alludes to the Scott incident, she creates the impression that it is not the Orangeman but Riel who is the victim. In the words she gives to Julie Riel, her first-born was elected as a Member of Parliament in 1873, “But instead of being allowed to take his seat/ he, my son/ was charged with the killing of Thomas Scott”. The poet adds cryptically that the “rights and wrongs of *that*/ will be argued for many a year. . . “, yet she herself will not pursue them (1972, 152). But then her authorial “purpose”, to echo her views in “The Documentary Poem,” perhaps does not allow her to dwell on the more controversial aspects of her subject’s life (1971, 274). After all, Livesay’s Riel is not a despot who cannot tolerate any opposition to his ideas but a humanist who fights on behalf of all groups, “the native-born/ and newcomer [sic] pioneer” alike. He is the epitome of Christian selflessness, the ethnocultural mediator who knows “how to set forth our rights/ yet offer, still in

Set in Winnipeg, the play focuses primarily on an extended Jewish-Canadian family, immigrant grandfather, his civil servant and university professor sons, and his journalist grandson. However, the author occasionally has Riel enter the scene, often sitting on Macdonald's shoulders. As the family deals with its intergenerational conflicts, the two historical antagonists imperviously bounce about, reflecting on what might have been. For example, the Prime Minister tells Riel that he and his people should be thankful that Canada acquired the North-West, since "THE AMERICANS WOULD HAVE SWARMED ALL OVER YOU" had they got there first. To which Métis leader replies, "WE COULD HAVE BUILT TOGETHER HAD YOU RECOGNIZED OUR RIGHT TO EXIST, IN OUR WAY, AS EQUALS. HAD YOU KEPT FAITH. . ." (18).

Wiseman's use of Riel, like that of Macdonald, is heavily symbolic. For the playwright, Canada's most famous immigrant represents the pragmatic newcomer who believes in "land grabbing, building an empire no matter what it costs. No matter what it costs somebody else." Riel, in contrast, typifies "the visionary" or "madman" who dreams of "a more humane society" (qtd. in Belkin 159). In the play proper, Macdonald's position is associated with the grandfather. The foreign-born patriarch is a real estate developer with an uncanny ability to divine land prices who, after an extremely successful business career, attempts to build a bridge to his grandson and the future by buying land and returning it to the First Nations. The central aim in both sets of relationships, the fictional one and the historical, is thus to achieve a fusion between the material and the spiritual, between the "immigrant" values of Macdonald and the "indigenous" ones of Riel. To quote the author's introduction to *Testimonial Dinner*, her play explores what it would be like "if Sir John and Riel could somehow, at some time, have been integrated, and Riel given his place in the land instead of endlessly suffering the same apparent defeat" (n.p.). Or as she tells an interviewer, "I'm not saying what would have happened if Riel had won and Macdonald lost.

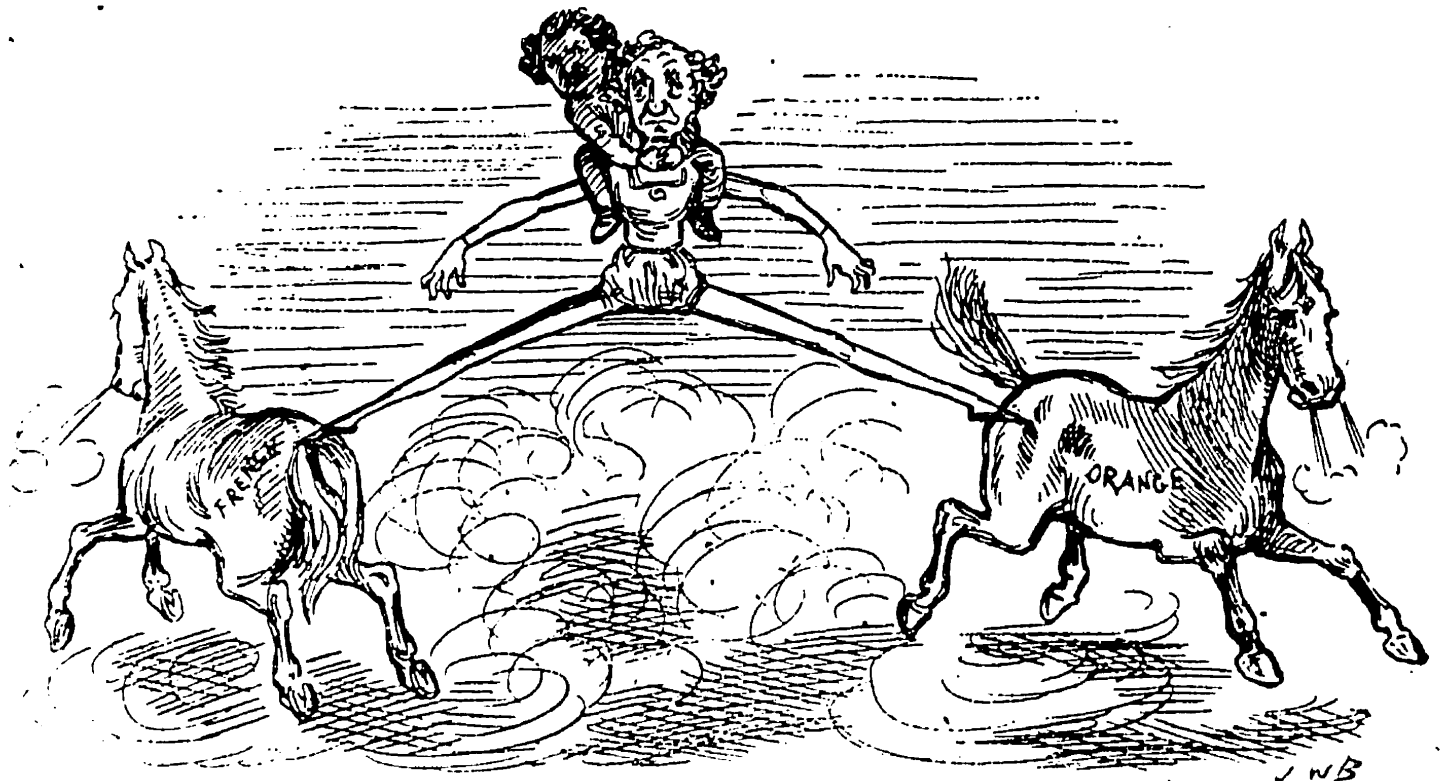
his place in the land instead of endlessly suffering the same apparent defeat” (n.p.). Or as she tells an interviewer, “I’m not saying what would have happened if Riel had won and Macdonald lost. That never comes into question, but what would have happened if Macdonald and his side had been more humane” (qtd. in Belkin 159). Wiseman’s dramatic exploration, though, remains largely abstract. The play’s two concurrent narratives never really coalesce, giving the work an experimental aura, which the author judges as a sign of its “textural density” (n.p.).

Incidentally, Wiseman’s characterization of Riel and Macdonald is far more sanguine than is the one articulated by its model. Although the author states that she “conceived the physical and symbiotic relationship” between the Métis leader and the Prime Minister independently, she admits to having been subsequently influenced by an iconic Bengough cartoon that she discovered while writing the play (58). Entitled “A Riel Ugly Position,” the 1885 caricature depicts Macdonald, with Riel perched on his shoulders, riding two horses moving in opposite directions. One horse is named “French opinion”; the other “English opinion” (Fig. 6). Wiseman’s objective in evoking such a charged image of Canada’s endemic French-English dualism is clearly political. As she writes in her introduction, her main aim in *Testimonial Dinner* is not just to dramatize her belief that “the past. . . is alive and functioning in the present,” that Macdonald still carries Riel “unassimilated on [his] spiritual back,” but also that the country’s social and political reality could have been otherwise (n.p.). Curiously, one finds very little of this optimism in her precursor. Judging by Bengough’s sequel to “A Riel Ugly Position,” which Wiseman does not cite, the turn-of-the-century cartoonist seems considerably more fatalistic about the possibility of any future national rapprochement between the forces represented by the two rivals. In the second cartoon, Riel is still sitting on Macdonald’s shoulders as the Prime Minister rides two horses. However, the two animals have moved so far apart that Macdonald seems about to split in half, before tumbling



A RIEL UGLY POSITION.

Fig. 6. "A Riel Ugly Position."



SOMETHING'S GOT TO GO SOON!

Fig. 7. "Something's Got to Go Soon!"

with Riel to the ground. One of the horses too is no longer called “ENGLISH INFLUENCE” but simply “ORANGE” (Fig. 7).

There is one other important representation of Riel as a cultural mediator, Adrian Hope’s “An Ode to the Metis” (1987). Relatively short, the poem is a veritable love letter to the progeny of the “stalwart” European pioneers and “Indian maidens,” especially their innate largess of spirit. To quote the poet:

Democracy was their byword,  
Equality for all.  
Having access to both cultures  
They were made to learn them all.

They taught the missionaries  
To speak the Native tongues;  
They also taught the natives [sic]  
Of things that are not done.  
They brought the great explorers  
To the lands up in the west,  
And showed them where to travel,  
On the routes that were the best. (iv)

Hope acknowledges that the Métis have suffered for their biological and cultural hybridity, which at times has led to their “not [being] accepted/ By the Indians or the whites”. Nevertheless, he believes that they should seek inspiration from their glorious past. The poet is particularly proud of the example set by Riel, the “educated” leader who was “hung [sic] for some misdeed” but is

now regarded as a Canadian patriot by “all the world. . . / By all men that are free.” As Hope concludes his ode to the “true sons of the west”, today’s challenges may be different from those in the old North-West, but “[w]e know that we will conquer--/ We are the great Metis” (v-vii).

Hope’s poem is noteworthy not just because it is one of the rare works by a Métis on the mediating role played by Riel and his people but also because it is so unequivocally proud of it. The few other Métis writers who have explored the subject certainly seem to do anything but revel in their biocultural in-betweenness. As Laure Bouvier describes her protagonist’s hybridity, concluding with an apparent allusion to Bengough’s cartoon of the two-horse rider:

Ni Blanche ni Amérindienne, les deux ensemble sans être l’une ou l’autre; vivant et travaillant depuis toujours au milieu des Blancs sans en souffrir mais sans jamais pouvoir être moi-même totalement, et quasi étrangère à la vie des premiers habitants de ce pays, je suis un être de frontières. À cheval sur deux mondes. Métisse, soit, mais à l’insu de tous presque. Comme si je vivais amputée d’une partie de mes origines. (186)

The discomfort felt by Métis writers about their mixed heritage becomes especially pronounced when an “Indian” draws attention to, the fact that “we/ are not one or the other but a shaded combination” (Scofield 82). Or when First Nations people, with their own land and official status, scorn the Métis and treat them like “the poor relatives, the *awp-pee-tow-koosons* [half-people]” (M. Campbell 25).

Even non-Métis writers, though, appear to have become increasingly weary of depicting Riel primarily as an intermediary between Canada’s First Nations and the European settlers. The reasons for this development are perhaps best articulated in the work of the Franco-Manitoban novelist Ronald Lavallée, the author of what is arguably the most popular work on the Métis

existential condition. Lavallée's *Tchipayuk, ou le chemin du loup* (1987) is not technically about Riel but about a Métis named Askik Mercredi. However, Askik's life parallels the Métis leader's to such a degree that one critic has called him a "Riel anonyme" (Joubert 176). Like his historical compatriot, Askik is born in the North-West, educated in Montreal, and suffers a romantic rejection in that city for racial reasons. That is, in spite of the fact that he comes to perceive himself as a Quebecker, he learns that his educational and social achievements ultimately account for little in his host society. As he confesses just before deciding to return home, "Il n'y a pas un seul ivrogne du Québec qui ne me soit supérieur. Je suis, et je serai toujours, pour les Canadiens, un sauvage" (1987, 399).

What Lavallée illustrates most conclusively in his long novel is the essential Otherness of the mixed-raced people of the North-West. As the Franco-Manitoban poet Paul Savoie writes in his collection *Bois brûlé* (1989), the Métis may be the quintessential intermediaries, a collectivity "à mi-chemin/ entre le nouveau monde/ et une ancienne promesse" (101). However, whether personified by Riel or Askik, they remain alien because of the inability or refusal of Canadians to accept them as equals. To quote R.G. Everson's poem "The Métis" (1969), the Plainsmen, who "have founded two countries/ and fought two wars against Canada", are "Canada's countrymen/ murdered by Canada". They are "Canada's might-have-been" (20). Consequently, it becomes extremely difficult to celebrate Canadian history through them. This is particularly true of Riel, whose story cannot help but reflect negatively on Canadians. The Métis leader is either their country's sworn enemy or a constant reminder of its racism toward the First Nations. It is thus perhaps not surprising that many recent Canadian writers on Riel have elected not to stress his role as a cultural go-between but rather his spirituality or his victimhood.

## Chapter V

### The Martyr (II): Riel as a Sociopolitical Victim of Confederation

Entre le rêve et lui surgit l'Anglais.

Maurice Constantin-Weyer (1925)

The essential Métisness of Riel, it was argued in the previous chapter, accounts for the most flagrant contradictions in the representations of him as a cultural mediator. At least since the end of World War II, the Riel project has become an increasingly English-Canadian enterprise, with the anti-Confederation rebel of 1869-70 and 1885 being transformed into “le symbole même du nationalisme anglo-canadien” (Morisset 1985a). However, since Riel is so unqualifiedly Métis, any portrayal of him as a Canadian patriot is bound to be seriously compromised by his Métis nationalism. Even those authors who portray Riel as a victim of the sociopolitical forces that culminated in Confederation find it extremely difficult to deal with his national specificity as a Métis. Some writers may begin by decrying the consequences of the predominantly Anglo-Celtic drive to expand Canada’s western frontier but, seemingly embarrassed by the apparent archaic lifestyle of the Métis, they often conclude by celebrating that development. Others, in contrast, circumvent the problem by turning Riel and his people into proto-Canadians. That is, they not

only distance themselves from their own biocultural ancestors but also deny the Métis their very identity as a nation.

One of the most curious representations of Riel as a sociopolitical victim of Confederation is Maurice Constantin-Weyer's novel *La bourrasque* (1925). Born in 1881, Constantin-Weyer was a Frenchman who spent the years between 1904 and 1914 farming in southern Manitoba. After he returned to his native land to fight in the Great War, he began a series of romanticized fictions inspired by his experiences in the New World that is credited with having introduced "l'Ouest canadien dans la littérature française" (Frémont 1932, 44; Motut 11, 164; Knutson 260). Known collectively as the "Épopée canadienne," Constantin-Weyer's Canadian works were extremely well received in France, one of them being honoured with the Prix Goncourt in 1928. The situation was radically different in Canada, however. While the French acclaimed the one-time settler as the "chantre du Canada" and the "Jack London français," French-Canadians felt insulted by what they considered his caricature of their community. The Métis and their allies were even more incensed by his "délibérément faux et odieux" characterization of themselves and, especially, their cherished leader (Motut 89-139; Frémont 1932, 69). In fact, so negative has been the response to Constantin-Weyer's depiction of Riel in *La bourrasque* that an English translation of the novel was "exclu" from Winnipeg's municipal libraries in the 1930s. To this day, the author's daughter also refuses to allow the French original to be republished, since "son contenu se situe aux antipodes de l'image que veut projeter la nation métisse" (Frémont 1932, 58-9; St. Pierre 12).

The most severe criticisms of Constantin-Weyer's portrait of Riel and the Métis in *La bourrasque* are his seemingly willful disregard for the historical record and an irreverence bordering on racism, neither accusation which can be easily refuted (Frémont 1932, 90-1, 103-4).

The author's nonchalance toward historical and geographic facts is evident in the novel's opening paragraph, where he writes that the Red River "prend sa source. . . dans le Wisconsin," as opposed to Lake Traverse on the border between South Dakota and Minnesota (1925, 9; Waters 109-10). Elsewhere in the work, he frequently juxtaposes the commercial and cultural differences between the "English" Hudson's Bay Company and "la Compagnie (française) des Pelleteries du Nord-Ouest", a Montreal-based firm that was in reality "dominated by men of Highland Scots origin" (1925, 14; Van Kirk 1980, 12). Similarly, throughout the novel he has Protestants celebrating William of Orange's fateful victory over King James at the Boyne, not on July 12, but on Canada's own national birthday, July 1. Perhaps most unforgivable for the Métis and their sympathizers, Constantin-Weyer takes tremendous liberties with the historical Riel, presenting "le plus intelligent et le plus instruit des gens de sa race" as a frontier bon-vivant far more interested in conquering female hearts than in defending the welfare of his people (Constantin-Weyer 1925, 38; Frémont 1932, 72).

Constantin-Weyer's Riel is still opposed primarily by English-Canadians, or "Anglais," a disreputable lot of the Protestant persuasion whose whole existence appears to revolve around the need to humiliate Catholics. The author actually traces Riel's political awakening to an incident at an Orange Day parade in a small Ontario town. When the then sixteen-year-old is overheard speaking French, on Protestantism's "jour sacré," he is "insulté d'abord, puis, de suite, frappé" by a group of irate Orangemen. The episode leaves an indelible imprint on the youngster, who in future years bolsters his confidence by recalling the day when "il avait si rudement châtié l'impudent agresseur." From that moment on, Canada too "lui devint odieux" and, on behalf of his people, he decides to fight the covetous and bigoted enemy (1925, 38-9). There is another reason, though, why Riel comes to believe that he is destined to lead the Métis--his own family

history. According to Constantin-Weyer, “Riel était la proie d’une ambition démesurée,” having inherited from his late father the “insatiable désir de domination, que le père n’avait pu réaliser, mais que le fils se promettait d’accomplir en entier” (1925, 36). The senior Riel, the author writes in an earlier volume of the “Épopée canadienne,” is frustrated in his dream of becoming the “roi” of the Métis by his lack of formal education and, upon the birth of his son and namesake, decides to “abdiquer ses espoirs en sa faveur” (1921, 14, 141). He thus inculcates into his offspring the conviction that the latter was born to conclude his work and become the supreme chief of the Métis people, which is not just a personal and familial ambition but “le rêve invraisemblable de sa race!” As the younger Riel tells himself later, “Lui, Riel, soulèverait les métis exaspérés par les spoliations britanniques. Il les dresserait, centaures invaincus, contre l’envahisseur. . . Puis, vainqueur, il se ferait couronner roi!” (1925, 42, 40)

Riel begins to advance his cause individually, levelling with “un coup” a Scots factor who dares to question the heroism of French soldiers in the Crimean War, but soon manages to rally most of his people, if not their spiritual leaders, to his side. The Catholic hierarchy, to whom the senior Riel had strategically entrusted the education of the would-be king is divided about the young man’s activities (1925, 54, 37; 1921, 14-5, 245). While the current bishop hopes that the preemptive actions by the Métis might help “préserver son diocèse de l’invasion orangiste,” he is mortified by the idea of rebellion, his knowledge of French history reminding him how the social revolution in “l’infortunée mère-patrie” in 1789 led to a “rébellion envers le droit divin” (1925, 60, 88). The one exception among the clergy is Father Ritchot who, “seul entre tous [les prêtres], avait pris franchement le parti des métis, et, chaque dimanche. . . , fulminait en chaire contre ‘les cochons de l’Ontario’”. Encouraged by that “partisan en soutane” and “fanatique ennemi des Anglo-Saxons, [qui] reconnût l’impérieuse nécessité d’un éveil national,” Riel eventually leads the

Métis to capture Fort Garry (1925, 92, 130). Riel's success, however, is short-lived. His role in the execution of the "meurtrier" Tom Scott forces him to relinquish his position and to flee to Montana, where "des amis américains lui avaient fait offrir une place d'instituteur" (1925, 178, 191).

After spending several years teaching in the United States, Riel returns to the Canadian North-West when Gabriel Dumont and a group of Saskatchewan Métis solicit his help in fighting the wicked "Anglais," who "profitaient de leur connaissance des lois injustes." Yet he is not destined to be of much assistance to his afflicted brethren. Fort Pitt apparently had become "une sorte de covenant" for English-Canadian Protestants but, when a local contingent meets with the Métis in the middle of the prairie, both parties are convinced that "tout se passerait en paroles." Inexplicably, the symbolically named and dashing Reverend Mac-Donald, who sports "grosses lunettes à monture d'or" and "un parapluie neuf (luxé inusité)," opens his umbrella close to the Métis. Riel's supporters interpret the display of that "monstrueux produit de la civilisation. . . comme une provocation," and an armed confrontation erupts, which becomes increasingly more preposterous--even if inspired by a historical incident at Frog Lake (1925, 224; Cameron 20). The Métis respond to the reading of a summons by the commander of the Canadian forces by aiming their guns at the enemy, and the soldiers promptly drop their arms. That is, the Canadians voluntarily "se constituèrent prisonniers," a decision not appreciated by their opponents, since it is not "guère facile à cinquante hommes d'en garder cinq cents." Nevertheless, the final outcome is inevitable. With the continuous arrival of reinforcements on the newly finished transcontinental railroad, the Canadian volunteers are able to repel the outnumbered Métis, who "s'égaillèrent de tous côtés" (1925, 225, 228).

Riel himself once again manages to seek refuge in the United States, but he is forced to

leave his wife and children on Canadian soil. Therefore, when he learns that his family has been taken hostage by “général Littletown,” as Constantin-Weyer calls General Middleton, he decides to come back to Canada. Riel is confident that he will be given a fair hearing by his foes, yet he soon discovers that he is to be tried not by an impartial judge and jury but by “les mannequins justiciards” (1925, 229, 240). His own spiritual adviser does not provide him with much solace, either. Father Ernest, a.k.a Father André, seems to be less God’s earthly representative than Satan’s. He is a modern-day inquisitor who not only compels Riel to hand him a letter in which the prisoner “rejetait sur le Père Ernest l’idée première de l’insurrection” but, “en vue d’un auto-da-fé,” also forces Riel to “promettre de prendre sur soi tout le poids de la révolte.” Likewise, two of the Métis leader’s three lawyers, instead of hailing from Quebec City, belong to “la loge orangiste de Régina” (1925, 239, 240). Indeed, it becomes discernible to everyone involved that no justice is possible under the circumstances. As another defendant, a Cree chief, encapsulates the process, “C’était la vision de la Justice des Blancs, qui, derrière son masque de fausse respectabilité, cache la laideur de son âme.” This is a verdict shared by Riel. Upon hearing his fated death sentence, he demands to be hanged “la figure tournée vers le nord, ‘du côté où il y a le moins d’Anglais’” (1925, 239, 248).

The conclusion of *La bourrasque* is powerful but quite misleading. Except for the last few pages, after the action shifts momentarily from Red River to Saskatchewan, Constantin-Weyer’s Riel is never a truly tragic figure. The Métis leader and his people are obviously victims of Anglo-Protestant racism, targets of the dual Orange desire to “délivrer l’Ouest canadien de la superstition catholique et de la langue française”. Still, it is not so apparent that they are deserving of the reader’s sympathies. They certainly appear not to have earned the author’s. Some twenty pages from the end, Constantin-Weyer actually has his narrator describe the second North-West

conflict as a “farce réellement gauloise” (1925, 31, 225). Riel himself is shown to be inordinately self-centred and manipulative, the sort of person who assumes “le titre assez singulier d’*Exovède*, voulant montrer sans doute qu’il se tenait hors du troupeau.” He is also someone who, when he realizes that he is about to be defeated by the Canadian forces, flees not just “sans trop savoir pourquoi” but also “comme s’il avait réellement participé à la rébellion.” Even more damning, Riel is an irresponsible leader, a Lothario who never allows the welfare of his people to interfere with a potential love affair (1925, 223, 228-9).

The most conclusive evidence that Constantin-Weyer does not really take his protagonist seriously, however, is the fact his Riel is not a political leader, a mystic, or even a madman, but a lover. Riel is reported to have had some romantic relationships with women, although not very felicitous ones. First, there was the secret engagement to Marie-Julie Guernon, which her parents supposedly terminated because of his mixed heritage (Stanley 1963, 33). Then, there was his long courtship of Evelina Barnabé, the sister of the Catholic priest of Keeseville, New York, at whose home Riel convalesced after his release from the Beauport asylum, and the subject of some of his more intimate lines:

O bonne Evelina! Vous que je trouve aimable  
 Et pour qui je désire un sort vraiment heureux!  
 Si vous mangez souvent le pain très délectable;  
       Si vous aimez la sainte table;  
 Je demande au bon Dieu qu’il exauce mes vœux  
 En daignant nous unir, au plus tôt, tous les deux. (IV, 214-5)

Finally, there was Marguerite Monet, the Montana Métisse for whom he would undiplomatically abandon Evelina because, as he wrote to the latter after the fact, “Le prêtre mon confesseur m’a

conseillé de me marier” (II, 265). There may have been a fourth woman in Riel’s life, his sister Sara. Extrapolating mainly from Riel’s advocacy of polygamy and incest (II, 144-161), scholars such as Thomas Flanagan have asserted that the Métis leader entertained deep incestuous desires for his younger sister, who later became a nun. Their case would seem to be supported by Sara’s ambiguous letters to her brother, in which she sends him “le baiser d’une soeur, dont la plus grande privation en ce moment est la séparation de son cher Louis!” Or, no less suggestively, “Je demande au Sacré Coeur de te dire pour moi que tu m’est cher--te d’assurer que je t’ai jamais aimé que depuis le jour où je me suis arrachée de tes bras” (122-3; 167-8). However, considering that the two siblings “were widely separated almost all their lives”, even Flanagan admits that any carnal desires Riel may have had toward Sara, and vice versa, “must have remained purely in the realm of the imagination” (1996, 93).

In any case, excluding the highly hypothetical relationship with Sara, Riel does not appear to have engaged in any unethical sexual practices, much less to have been a Don Juan. Yet that is how Constantin-Weyer portrays him. The Riel of *La bourrasque* is particularly irresistible to Métis women, both young and not-so-young. Part of his attraction lies in his family name, the fact that he is the son of a man that even the clergy concedes is the “chef temporel de la colonie”. Another portion resides in his complexion, his being “étonnement blanc pour un métis”. With his “barbe blonde frisée,” Riel is even “plus blanc” than the local Scots, French Canadians, or French (1925, 37, 63). It is certainly difficult to ascribe his success with women to any exceptional gallantry. For instance, he beckons the voluptuous Véronique Lapointe to come to his side at a dance with “un simple et impérieux clignement d’œil.” Later, he concludes the seduction by telling the young woman, “T’as des beaux tétons, Véronique!” a compliment that supposedly goes right to Véronique’s “cœur” and impels her to succumb to her suitor’s designs (1925, 50, 55).

Riel's romantic liaisons, though, are not restricted to Métis women, or even Catholic ones. In fact, his most significant conquest in the novel is an "Anglaise" named Madame Hamarstyne, a beautiful but pious Presbyterian who, as a critic rightly notes, "deserves a novel of her own" (Osachoff 1985, 64). Very loosely modelled on the historical Annie Bannatyne, the Halfbreed woman who publicly horsewhipped Charles Mair for his derogatory comments about the social rivalries between mixed-race and white women at Red River (Mair 1868, 396; Dumas 27-8), Hamarstyne is both violently attracted and repelled by the young Métis. The couple first meets, accidentally, at her store. Remembering that he had once seen "un Français baiser la main d'une femme", Riel decides to do the same with Hamarstyne. This is a gesture that she seems to fail to appreciate, telling him bluntly: "Je vous déteste." Her real feelings toward Riel, however, are far more complex, and contradictory. She is mortified by the idea of falling in love with a man other than her husband, but she dreads even more that the man in question happens to be an impious Catholic. In her words about God's potential judgment of her behaviour, "Qu'est-ce qu'il va penser de Sa créature. . . Et un catholique encore. . . . Un catholique. . . c'est une honte. . . une grande honte." Still, in spite of her genuine fear of damnation, Hamarstyne is unable to resist her physical desire for the alluring stranger. As she addresses Riel just before he leaves her shop, "Partez, lui cria-t-elle entre deux sanglots. . . Partez et ne m'induisez plus en tentation. . . Mon mari ne rentrera que demain. . . Revenez ce soir. . . tard" (1925, 70, 71).

Hamarstyne's schizophrenic relationship with Riel, which wavers ferociously between lust and remorse, reaches particularly frenetic highs during lovemaking:

En chemise, elle s'arracha de son étreinte, et sauta dans le lit, dont les bois crièrent. S'étant déshabillé en un tournemain, il l'y suivit. Elle lui sut gré de la posséder avec une naïve et précise maladresse, qui diminuait d'autant le péché.

Quand elle revint à elle, elle sanglota, tout en l'accablant de paroles désagréables. Il comprit alors qu'elle craignait terriblement la damnation. Faisant alors, un retour sur lui-même, il la plaignit d'être protestante. Lui, catholique, serait facilement lavé par l'absolution. Il crut devoir balbutier des paroles incohérentes et stupides, qu'elle n'écoutait pas. Il fit alors mine de se retirer; mais elle le retint et s'abandonna de nouveau à ses caresses, avant de recommencer la même scène de larmes. (1925, 74)

Notwithstanding Hamarstyne's awareness of the religious divide between herself and Riel, such is their sexual passion for each other that, by the end of their first night together, she "lui fit jurer de l'aimer toujours, et de revenir au premier signe qu'elle lui ferait" (1925, 75).

While the body may initially seem to triumph over the spirit, the romantic liaison between Riel and Hamarstyne is ultimately destroyed if not by religion at least by politics, two subjects that admittedly are not always separable in the history of Catholic-Protestant relations. After Scott is sentenced to death by a Red River court martial, Hamarstyne begs the Métis leader to spare the controversial Orangeman, even at the cost of her life. Or, as she dramatically puts it, "Prends-la Riel. . . mon âme, prends-la, mais sauve Scott." Riel promptly accedes to his lover's request, merely asking that she let him give "les ordres. . . Il n'y a plus qu'une demi-heure à peine. . .". But, in her rush to show her appreciation for her paramour's magnanimity, Hamarstyne throws her arms around Riel, murmuring: "nous avons le temps. . . Oh! . . . Oh! . . . Oh! . . . Riel. . . Prends-moi. . . prends-moi tout de suite" (1925, 183-4). Lost in ecstasy, the two lovers become oblivious to the world, until they hear a short "commandement" in the courtyard below. Riel runs to the window but, by then, guns have been discharged and "[i]l y avait par terre une tache immobile." He and Hamarstyne glance at each other and, instinctively, both know that whatever

held them together has suddenly vanished. In the narrator's words, "Ils savaient maintenant devoir se haïr mutuellement à jamais, et que l'énoncé même du nom de l'un serait pour l'autre une douleur inguérissable." Moreover, it is not only their relationship that dies with Scott. Along with the Ontarian with the "jeune figure de demi-dieu" also perishes Riel's political career, for English-speaking Canada will not permit the killer of one of its own to attain power. In other words, Riel has committed political suicide (1925, 184, 127)..

As portrayed by Constantin-Weyer, Riel thus owes his political downfall primarily to his own libido. Yet the novelist goes further, suggesting that the Métis leader's sexual adventurism is a reflection not so much of his individual personality as of his biocultural background. Throughout *La bourrasque*, Riel's conduct is attributed to his "âme indienne", his "sang indien", or some "atavisme indien" (1925, 58, 69, 186). This association of the protagonist's behaviour with his First Nations roots has been decried by critics, who find it especially perplexing in light of the source. After all, the author was married to a Métis woman, whom he allegedly abandoned when he returned to Europe, and his own children "sont plus indiens que ne l'était Riel" (Frémont 1932, 32-3, 104). Still, what is often ignored is that Constantin-Weyer can be almost as critical of Riel's French heritage as he is of his First Nations one. As the author has one character state, "chez les métis, ce n'est pas le sang indien qui fait le sauvage, mais bien le sang français." Or as his narrator explains why the Halfbreeds disdain their French-speaking cousins: "Pour eux, les métis français étaient issus de deux races vaincues" (1925, 169, 168). Indeed, the main reason that Riel appears to fail in his quest to become king of the Métis is that he is largely a product of Franco-Catholic civilization, a metaphysics-laden culture that purportedly lacks the vitality of the more pragmatic Anglo-Protestant civilization that the author both abhors and admires.

One of the more intriguing aspects of *La bourrasque* is the fact that its most positive

character is not Riel, or even some Frenchman or Quebecker, but that celebrated exponent of Anglo-Canadian expansionism, Donald A. Smith. Although the future Lord Strathcona plays a relatively minor role in the novel, he is about the only figure who is consistently depicted in favourable terms. An avid imperialist, Smith is not just a director of the Hudson's Bay Company and of the Canadian Pacific Railway but the very embodiment of what the author elsewhere calls the "poème de l'étonnante réussite anglo-saxonne" (1924, 75-86; Collet 1980). Above all, the Scottish-born magnate is a "poète," a "créateur", who declares that it is "le lyrisme qui fait les nations, c'est l'analyse qui les défait. Que serait l'Empire sans le chant des poètes". Tellingly, Smith does not derive his poetic inspiration from the work of Shakespeare, Milton, or even Robbie Burns, but from what he describes as both the "plus grand" of all poems and the "plus beau manuel d'impérialisme", the Bible. For Smith, the Bible, or more specifically the Old Testament, is his only guide not just on matters spiritual but also on matters material. It is from his assiduous reading of the Scriptures that he discerns that the English are God's "peuple élu" and that Canada is the "terre de Chanaan" (1925, 145-6). When most people look at Canada, including Smith's Methodist secretary and the French, they tend not to see past Voltaire's proverbial "[q]uelques arpents de neige," the "immensité monotone" of endless frozen wastelands (1925, 145-6; Voltaire 188). Smith, however, senses both the country's untapped natural riches and its unique beauty. To quote his sexually-charged encomium to the new Promised Land, Canada is "une jeune vierge cachée sous ses voiles blancs. . . une jeune vierge en robe de noces, et qui dort. . . Et moi Smith, comme dans les contes de fée, je viens éveiller cette jeune vierge, je vais la baiser sur la bouche, je vais la féconder." Or as he adds later, "Une perle, ce pays. Une perle chatoyante en hiver. . . Une couronne d'épis d'or en été. . . Beau joyau pour l'impériale collection" (1925, 145, 151).

Smith's vision of Canada, and of the world, is an explicitly social-Darwinian one, in which he and the English people seem to have been elected by Providence to take possession not only of the country's territory but also of its human inhabitants. As he states, while he foresees the Canadian landscape "couvert de champs de blé qui onduleront au vent sur les mêmes rythmes que les plis du pavillon de l'*Union Jack*", he stresses that the "gentils sèmeront ce blé, et les fils du peuple élu le récolteront." He further adds that "nous. . . élèverons à nous" at least the more interesting natives, "à condition bien entendu, qu'ils deviennent de bons et loyaux sujets de l'Empire. . . Les autres travailleront, ou créveront." Still, there are few indications in the text that Constantin-Weyer does not approve of this raw imperialism. On the contrary, judging by his portrait of the peripatetic Highlander, the French novelist appears to fully endorse Smith's evolutionary view of history. As the Métis once vanquished the "premiers propriétaires du sol" and introduced their "anarchie bienheureuse," they are now being displaced by a more dynamic civilization. The only regret that one detects about this development on the part of the author is that Canada's new rulers will be those "lecteurs de la Bible", the English, not his beloved French (1925, 149, 13; 1924, 75). As he ruefully notes, after La Vérendrye's explorations in the first half of the eighteenth century, France controlled "un bon tiers des États-Unis et du Canada." Yet, by the end of the following century, all those possessions had been squandered, a loss that he blames largely on the pernicious impact on French culture of Catholicism or the New Testament, which appear to be one and the same. According to Constantin-Weyer, in contrast to the English, the French have not yet liberated themselves intellectually "de toute la sensibilité du Nouveau Testament". Therefore, instead of embracing only the "enseignements virils" of the Old Testament, they fall for the love-thy-brother fantasies of the New. This precludes the French from grasping the reality of human nature and the need for long-term planning, such as is required in

the development of new lands, which explains their failure to control North America. As he has Smith pontificate, “L’Évangile, c’est un rêve socialiste. Que serait l’Angleterre si elle était catholique? . . . Un pays d’utopies humanitaires. C’est-à-dire rien” (1925, 14, 16, 149-50).

Curiously, in spite of Constantin-Weyer’s apparent eulogization of Anglo-Protestant culture in *La bourrasque*, at least one Canadian publisher did not deem the work Anglophilic enough. In 1930, five years after the publication of the original text, two anonymously-translated English-language editions appeared in North America, one in Canada and the other in the United States. Entitled *The Half-breed*, the U.S. edition is generally faithful. The Canadian edition, which carries the more judgmental title of *A Martyr’s Folly*, is virtually identical to the U.S. one except for the section dealing with Riel’s trial. For example, “le mannequin-chef” (236) is rendered by the U.S. edition as “the puppet-chief” but by the Canadian version as “the stipendiary magistrate judge” (1930a, 295; 1930b, 294). Likewise, “les mannequins justiciards” (240) is translated in *The Half-breed* as “the legal puppets” and in *A Martyr’s Folly* as “the court” (1930a, 299; 1930b, 299). More critically, in the latter work, two whole sections on the politics of the trial are deleted and two new ones added. In one of the new sections, Riel expounds on his belief that “I have a mission” and on the testimony of “the glorious General Middleton”. In the other, “after Scott’s avengers [have] no difficulty in condemning Riel to capital punishment,” the counsel for the Crown discusses the potential ramifications of the proceedings at Regina (1930b, 300, 302). One of the lawyers is concerned that the federal Liberal opposition leader will be “thundering out his indignation at the notion of a mere stipendiary magistrate trying a case of such nation-wide importance”. His colleague, however, is more anxious about the likely “appeal to race prejudice” by another Liberal politician, “the honey-tongued” former Minister of Justice--and future Prime Minister--Wilfrid Laurier. The first lawyer also confides what he thinks is the real reason that Riel

must die. While the Métis leader was “a kind of Joan of Arc in a mild way,” the attorney asserts, his religious heterodoxy has cost him the support of the Catholic community. This is fortunate because “the Orangemen won’t let us forget Scott. It is that folly that will hang him in the end, though it can never be brought forward as the prime reason” (1930b, 304-5).

*A Martyr’s Folly* too bears a most revealing introduction by one of Canada’s best known turn-of-the-century intellectuals, Pelham Edgar. A former professor of both French and English at the University of Toronto’s Victoria College, Edgar was the mentor of such distinguished literary scholars as E.K. Brown, Douglas Bush, Kathleen Coburn, and Northrop Frye, the last of whom christened him the “Dean of Critics” (Frye 1948, 169). Edgar is extremely complimentary toward Constantin-Weyer, lauding him for his novel’s “essentially foreign truth,” which is nevertheless “compacted of values that are eminently worth while, and which a native writer might have missed by excess of saturation.” Edgar does chide the author for focusing disproportionately on the events at Red River and for having “swerved from historic fact in permitting Riel to escape into the United States after the Batoche episode.” Still, he is effusive in his praise of Constantin-Weyer’s Rabelaisian characterization of the Métis, a people that the Canadian academic describes as being “[i]lliterate, superstitious, sensual, deliriously drunken, and as incapable of organization as a horde of Bedlamites” (v-vi). Edgar seems especially impressed with the French novelist’s impartiality, his obvious respect for Anglo-Protestant enterprise. In Edgar’s words:

The drama of nation building is always an imposing spectacle. When the obstacles to success are merely physical the play lacks the full virtue of the clash of opposites. Here we have at least some element of the human conflict, and if the author permitted himself to dwell with sympathy on the futile dreams and aspirations of a little people, he gave also, in the empire vision of the young

Donald A. Smith, the necessary counterpoise.” (vi)

Ironically, while commending the translator for his “reproductive skill,” Edgar regrets that the use of the Crown counsel in the novel is “meagre if ingenious”, seemingly unaware that the two lawyers are mainly the creation not of the author but of either the translator or some ghostwriter (vii; Knutson 274).

The portraits of Riel in *La bourrasque* and *A Martyr's Folly* are clearly idiosyncratic, yet they are representative of their time at least in their negativity toward the Métis leader. As stated earlier in this study, Riel would not be widely depicted as a hero until after the end of World War II. The rehabilitation of his image actually begins in the 1930s. Such works as Jonas Jonasson's “The Riel Rebellions” (1933); A.S. Morton's *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (1936), and George F.G. Stanley's *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions* (1936) provided an increasingly balanced perspective on Riel and his people. However, all those were academic texts and had virtually no impact on the wider Canadian public, Jonasson's doctoral dissertation never even finding a publisher (Owram 1982, 323-4). In the words of Stanley, who would later emerge as the dean of Riel scholars, “To interpret Riel as the defender of a Native culture rather than as a rebel against constituted authority was to imply. . . a degree of sympathy unacceptable at that time to many Canadians” (1986, 11).<sup>1</sup> This was a situation that would not change until 1952, with the publication of *Strange Empire*, by the Alberta-raised Montana writer Joseph Kinsey Howard.

*Strange Empire*, which was published posthumously--the first U.S. edition is subtitled “A

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<sup>1</sup> Although Stanley is still widely respected by contemporary Riel scholars, there are some dissenting voices. The most vocal of these is arguably Howard Adams, who describes Stanley as “a colonizer academic” and *The Birth of Western Canada* as “a pseudo-Bible. . . , one of the more racist and mythical histories of Aboriginal people in Canada” (1995, 95).

*Narrative of the Northwest*" (1952b) and the first Canadian one "*Louis Riel and the Métis People*" (1952a)--is a difficult work to categorize. In the foreword he wrote for the manuscript, which he would manage to complete but not revise before his early death, Howard claims that "[e]ven the words spoken by the people in this book are taken from the record. . . . There is no interpolated fictional dialogue" (1952a, 19; DeVoto 3-5). Yet his text, which bears no footnotes, is extremely subjective, a situation that usually results in historians classifying it a historical novel (Payment 34; D. Morton 1992, 52) and fiction writers a work of history (Gutteridge 1970, 11). While *Strange Empire* makes no notable contribution to Riel scholarship, it has emerged as a landmark in the history of the reception of the Métis leader in Canada. There are several reasons for this fact. First, Howard is a most gifted storyteller, as is evident in his reconstruction of the life of someone like the "conspiratorial cripple" Enos Stutsman, a U.S. customs agent, lawyer, and journalist who would play a pivotal role at Red River in spite of the fact that he was born without legs. Second, he is a writer-activist, a partisan who openly celebrates Riel as a gentle "dictator, who adored God and feared and hated bloodshed," and who excoriates Canada for its "bigotry and imperialistic visions" (1952a, 81-3, 17, 144). Finally, despite its blatant U.S. continentalism, Howard's hybrid work seems to have appealed to Canadians primarily because it signals the discovery of a Canadian historical figure by a U.S. writer, a parochial response that Canadian Riel scholars have long resented (Owram 1982, 323-6; Stanley 1986, 11-2).

Contrary to the general impression created by his many detractors, Howard does not paint a one-dimensional portrait of Riel. In fact, mixed with its adulation of the "erstwhile poet, almost priest", *Strange Empire* also carries the seeds of his possible unmaking as a hero, particularly as a Prairie hero, his supposed untypicality. To quote Howard's description Riel:

He was a mediocre horseman. He was clumsy and his hands were undexterous;

many men of his race caught in prairie blizzards with no tool save a knife could survive, but he would have committed his soul to God and died. He could not shoot straight: he knew nothing of firearms and he dreaded and shunned them all his life. Living among people who drank to excess whenever they could, he used liquor sparingly; he had enemies who claimed they had seen him drunk, but as many friends swore he was a teetotaler. As for women, not even his enemies could make out a case against him. Either he had resigned himself to the priestly vow of chastity or he was unusually discreet, and he was nearly forty when he married.

(1952a, 147-8)

Constantin-Weyer notwithstanding, Howard's Riel is a rather ascetic individual. He is not just un-Métis but un-Western, an Eastern-educated intellectual who seems utterly out of place on his native soil. As even Riel's hagiographic biographer Maggie Siggins puts it, he is "something of a prig and a momma's boy" (32). Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine why Howard would anticipate that the "John Brown of the Half-Breeds" might be destined to be superseded in the Western pantheon by that natural man par excellence, the "Prince of the Prairies" Gabriel Dumont (1952a, 308, 358).

Still, Howard's hopelessly urbane if not effete Riel remains the undisputed leader of the Métis, the personification of their "dream of a strange empire in the West." He is both their "brain" and "their voice: the only man they had ever produced. . . whose eloquence could become a sort of alchemy, transmuting frontier expedients into eternal human values, shaping standards out of habits" (1952a, 18, 148). More significantly, Riel is not just the Métis chief but the potential leader of all Prairie First Nations. He is a nativist visionary who pays no heed to the "wholly artificial boundary" between Canada and the United States and who, had he and his

people won at Red River, would have transformed the North-West into an “organized native state.” That is, as both Howard and his editor Bernard DeVoto stress, Riel is an “American primitive” (1952a, 49, 251; DeVoto 8-9). Or to phrase it differently, Riel is not an adversary but an ancestor, arguably the aspect of *Strange Empire* that had the most immediate impact on other writers, on either side of the international border.

The first author to be directly influenced by Howard was a fellow U.S. citizen, the North Dakota playwright Frederick Walsh. First staged at Fargo’s Little Country Theatre, Walsh’s *The Trial of Louis Riel* (1963) deals chiefly with the Regina proceedings of 1885. The most noteworthy aspect of the two-act drama is its unrelenting focus on the political nature not just of Riel’s trial but of history in general. The action is partly narrated by six talesmen, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* maintains can be either storytellers or substitute jurors, as if the playwright wishes “to remind us that Riel’s jury was deficient in numbers” and that we, too, must become “talesmen, called upon to make up the deficiency” (Chris Johnson 191). To quote the narrator, “Treason was the charge, but treason is a word, and it is always the victor who defines the term” (19).

Walsh’s Riel is basically a gentle if innocent mystic, a political leader that even one of his opponents asserts believes that “religion should be based on morality and humanity and charity.” Against him are the rapacious governments of the United States and Canada, especially the latter and its wily leader, Macdonald. Early on Walsh has one character claim that “[w]hoever builds the railroads will control the whole Northwest,” a thesis the author then proceeds to demonstrate (75, 15). The central premise of *The Trial of Louis Riel* is actually that the Prime Minister himself deliberately provokes the second North-West conflict in order to get public support to finance the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Macdonald learns from one of his cabinet ministers

that if the railroad does not reach the Pacific soon, Canada is bound to lose part of its territory to its southern neighbour, since “many of our people out in Manitoba are talking about pulling out of the Dominion and joining the United States”. Not surprisingly, the Prime Minister is distressed by the prospect of witnessing his dream of a transcontinental country vanishing the moment he seems about to realize it. However, another minister instantly devises a strategy to preserve Canada’s territorial integrity, by finishing building the railroad. As the second minister explains his plan to Macdonald, “We order the army to move against Riel. The army will need to be provisioned and supplied. Hence the railroad for the war effort. A few taxes here and there ought to do the job and everyone’s happy.” Or as the narrator concludes, “And so the dream of a transcontinental railroad was married to the dreams of a few rebellious half-breeds” (59, 61, 62).

A distinct portrait of Riel as a sociopolitical victim of Confederation emerges in the opera *Louis Riel* (1967). Generally considered “the first (some might say only)” major achievement in the history of the Canadian music theatre, the three-act opera was composed by Harry Somers, then the country’s “leading composer” (Kaptainis; Schafer 5, 17). Its multilingual libretto, which in addition to English and French contains some Cree and Latin, was written by Mavor Moore, with the assistance of the Quebec playwright Jacques Languirand--“who improv[ed] my French scenes” (Moore 1994, 332). Curiously, for a Centennial project, *Louis Riel* follows Howard in its overt demonization of Canadian expansionists, from Scott to Macdonald. For instance, the work opens with the arrival at the Minnesota-North-West border of William McDougall and his entourage, including his daughter, with whom he is “BORNE ONSTAGE [SIC] IN A LITTER ALMOST AS PRETENTIOUS AS A SEDAN-CHAIR” (2). Red River’s Lieutenant-Governor designate, though, is not just a pseudo-aristocrat but a bigot, as is evident from his reaction when he learns that the Métis have blocked his way by lowering a gate across the road:

Damn half-breeds have been at it again.

Hallo! Is anyone there? (NO REPLY)

Alright! [sic]

We'll show them who's master here:

We'll show the rebels what is what!

We'll teach them to be civilized

If we have to hang the ruddy lot!

Fire a shot! (2)

Similarly, following Scott's execution, the militant Canadian nationalist John Christian Schultz is shown inflaming passions in Ontario in a "holy crusade" against Riel and the Métis, the people who purportedly murdered the Orangeman for "his faith!" Schultz not only "POCKETS THE HATFUL OF COINS" that the outraged Ontarians have donated to the cause but even concedes to his associate Charles Mair that "Thomas Scott alive/ was a pain in every ass/ but his corpse'll be a hero by and by" (24-5).

In contrast, Riel and the Métis are depicted as a most humane and pacific group. Even after Scott orders Ambroise Lépine to "[s]peak English, mongrel!" and calls him a "Papish half-breed", Riel's Red River commander "STANDS BY WITH GREAT DIGNITY" (3, 5). Riel's political demands too seem patently reasonable. As the politician-mystic informs the Easterners, he is not "starting a prairie fire" but "stopping one from breaking out." Or as he clarifies, no one has the "right to take away our rights!/ This land was ours before you came:/ it is not yours to sell." Particularly in the second North-West conflict, Riel, who has an "INDIAN WIFE" rather than a Métis one, is supposed to be acting on behalf not just of the Métis but of all First Nations. Thus the Saskatchewan Valley contingent that travels to Montana to ask him to go to Batoche, in

addition to Dumont, includes the “ENGLISH-SPEAKING HALF-BREED” James Isbister and “POUNDMAKER, CHIEF OF THE CREES!” (61, 34, 35) Poundmaker of course is not reported to have gone to Montana and his insertion reveals the librettists’ deliberate attempt to highlight the existence of a Métis-First Nations alliance in 1885, a solidarity that incidentally is decried as a pernicious “myth” in the first history of those events from a First Nations perspective (Stonechild and Waiser 1, 240).

Moore and Languirand’s political tendentiousness is echoed in the opera’s music. As the composer R. Murray Schafer has noted, “Somers has set most of the Prime Minister’s lines in *Sprechgesang* to contrast with Riel’s passionate and lyrical singing. A sort of atonal vaudeville is evoked for Ottawa.” Somers creates “the work’s most poignant moments” in the mostly unaccompanied arias that he gives to Riel and his wife, a technique seemingly employed “to evoke the loneliness of Canada’s pioneer life.” Macdonald, on the other hand, is portrayed as “a rather silly figure. The prelude to Act II has a staggering, intoxicated lilt which is an obvious reference to the Prime Minister’s alleged alcoholism” (19). In fact, it is quite telling that when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) televised the opera two years later, in 1969, the one “significant characterization change” that the producer felt compelled to effect was to make Macdonald appear “a little less farcical” (Schafer 24).

Despite their undisguised antipathy toward individual Canadian nationalists, Moore and Languirand--like Somers--appear to be quite sympathetic to the idea of Confederation itself. They may not fully subscribe to Macdonald’s nationalistic determinism, the conviction that Canada must either become a transcontinental nation or collapse. Yet the librettists are obviously not indifferent to the fate of Confederation, as is evident from the words they give to the Prime Minister:

Nothing can stop this country now.  
 There may be local obstacles,  
 jealousy and hate and pride:  
 but the wheel, my friends, is turning and  
 we are only flies upon the wheel.  
 Nothing can stop us. Nothing will.  
 If we unite from sea to sea  
 we shall become a mighty power:  
 if we do not, we'll all be naught. . .  
 shouting unheard in French and English both. (11)

Indeed, in light of Moore and Languirand's contrasting depiction of the Métis and their Canadian adversaries, the most surprising aspect of their work is the parallel they draw between Macdonald and Riel. The two leaders ultimately appear to be less visionaries than mere politicians, two short-sighted and opportunistic individuals who hide behind the state in order to justify the elimination of an opponent, and who use precisely the same words in doing so. Riel asserts that Scott must be executed because "I cannot let one foolish man/ stand in the way of a whole nation!" Macdonald, in turn, states that Riel must die, since "I cannot let one foolish man/ stand in the way of a whole nation!" (21, 52). That is, notwithstanding its skepticism about certain facets of Canadian nationalism, if not nationalism in general (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 4, 8), *Louis Riel* in the end both condemns and celebrates the ideals of Canadian nationhood. It owes far less to Howard's continentalist Riel than it does to the Riel of John Coulter, the playwright that Moore says first recognized the Prophet of the New World as "an ambiguous Canadian legend" and whom Moore describes as "a great progenitor" (1994, 176, 354).

Howard's influence, though, is pervasive in a subsequent Canadian representation of the Métis leader, Don Gutteridge's *Riel: A Poem for Voices* (1968). An Ontario author who specializes in long poems about prominent individuals in Canadian history, what he calls "private poems about public figures" (1970, 8), Gutteridge is even more unabashedly pro-Riel than his model. Although Howard extols Riel as "the Métis's only prophet of nationalism", he expresses serious reservations about the formal education that makes that role possible, for it supposedly alienates him from his land and people. Howard is also rather ambivalent about both Riel's religious ideas and the European part of his biocultural heritage, commenting that "Louis was more white than red, and consequently he was a worrier" (1952a, 501, 337). Gutteridge, on the other hand, appears to have no doubts whatsoever about his protagonist's oneness with his world. As the Canadian poet depicts the young Riel's last meeting with his father before leaving for Montreal:

They were walking: as a Métis always walked  
 Because a man could feel the Mother Earth through the palms  
 Of his feet, and know the firmness of her flesh  
 And the great unturning heart at the centre of her,  
 Were walking because walking told in every stride  
 Of man's moving over the earth in a passing as brief  
 As a footprint, and because a Métis found  
 In walking a togetherness of spirit,  
 Of flesh knowing the same earth at the same turning  
 Of the sun or the season, and a man moving  
 Was like the wind's loving of the deep grasses,

And did not stand like the rocks and die with stillness  
 In the bones, and because a walking made spring  
 Out of muscle and limb, and a man could feel  
 His body lean as a willow in its long greenness,  
 And because there was joy in a Métis walking  
 With himself or his brother. (1968, 2)

Even though Riel is about to embark on a spiritual and intellectual journey devoted to the study of Western theology, the would-be priest is certain of his communion with his natural surroundings because “[t]hese things had been told/ To him by his elders, and he had felt them” (1968, 2).

Judging by its subtitle, *Riel* is reputedly a polyphonic work. Combining fictional discourse with letters to newspapers, commercial advertisements, journal entries, traditional songs, and government reports, Gutteridge’s poem is narrated from a variety of perspectives, including those of Riel, Macdonald, Scott, Evelina Barnabé, and an anonymous Canadian soldier. However, there is never much question which voice the poet privileges, the eponymous hero’s. Gutteridge has actually questioned the possibility of poetry ever being polyphonic, writing that “a poem denies/ all idelect in/ favour of its own” (1977, 64). But the truth perhaps is that monologism is not so much a characteristic of poetry itself but of this particular poet’s work. In his words, “I never try, like a true dramatist, to get my own personality out of the way.” Or as he adds, his poetry is driven by a strong “didactic urge” (qtd. in Cooley 39, 42), a characteristic that is conspicuously evident in *Riel*.

For Gutteridge, the promoters of Canadian expansion into the North-West are not just misguided but evil, a fiendish horde whose utter amorality is surpassed only by its innate stupidity. As the poet has Schultz describe his vision for Red River, “One had to believe in some ‘cause’;

and the West/ Would be caught up in the Orange thrust and commercial/ Sweep, as it were, of Ontario.” As well, Macdonald, that “ragamuffin Glasgow boy/ With soot-stained palms”, dreams of a transcontinental nation without ever “knowing what the reality was, nor when.” Gutteridge, though, reserves his most acrid vitriol for the volatile Scott and Mair, the “buffalo-rimer and sometime epic bard” (1968, 9, 17, 8). Mair was a much-maligned but obviously complex individual, an apostle of Anglo-Canadian culture who could also write that the greatest crime “in the natural history of America” was “the reckless and almost total destruction of the bison,” by “that great enemy of wild nature, the white man” (1890, 93, 95). Yet Gutteridge simply dismisses him as a colonial and a fraud. He has Schultz describe his confederate as “stupid” and an “ass”, who suffers from an “acute constipation of the brain” and whose political ideas are even “less successful than/ His importunate iambicizing.” Scott, too, is not just intemperate but a pervert, a torturer of animals. He is a beastly dullard who thrills on driving a herd of buffalo over a bluff, “bones stickin out like a bunch a felled trees, all splintery, an the blood squirtin every which way”. As the recent Ontario immigrant, and thus most unlikely buffalo hunter, gleefully recounts the slaughter to his fellow prisoners at Fort Gary, “By God, fellas, I tell ya, I ain’t had so much fun *since*. . . . I tell ya, that there half-breed antichrist, is gonna end up just like them bulls at the bottom of some cliff, an the only thunder’s gonna be me laughin, just laughin an laughin. . . .” (1968, 7, 25-6).

The violence and partiality of Gutteridge’s characterization of the Canadian politicians and settlers, perhaps not surprisingly, elicited a swift censure by the poet Edward Lacey, which in turn triggered an even more combative essay by Gutteridge. Canada’s ““first homosexual poet,”” as well as a tormented soul who wrote under his own name but pretended it was a pseudonym (Lacey 1995, 104; Beissel 10), Lacey makes a series of criticisms. The first of these is that, in his

foreword to *Riel*, Gutteridge confuses the Métis with the French Canadians and thus erroneously constructs his poem in terms of “the French-English problem”. More germanely, he chastises the author for “the evident bias with which Mr. Gutteridge treats Riel’s opponents and mingles fancy with history” (1969, 130-1). The Ontario-born Lacey, who spent most of his adult life as an expatriate--primarily in the tropical climes of South America and Asia--was not exactly a supporter of Canadian nationalism or Canadian nationalists. Indeed, he rejected both the “culture & climate” of his native land, an unformed country “whose only rebels fled,/ when defeated,” and “whose only heroes were hanged or exiled failures, or decorate boxes of/ chocolates” (Lacey 1995, 48; 1974, 60; Beissel 6, 10). Still, he is extremely critical of Gutteridge’s portrayal of Schultz and Scott, demanding to know where is the author’s “authority for considering Scott a sadist to animals (except, of course, Canadian cultural traditions) or for causing him to speak an unauthentic, subliterate garble?” In his words, “If Mr. Gutteridge is going to invent material, let him do so credibly” (1969, 131).

Gutteridge’s response to Lacey’s “barbarous” and “ungentlemanly charges” was “Riel: Historical Man or Literary Symbol?” an illuminating essay in which he expresses his views both of his poem and of poetry about historical figures in general. Gutteridge begins by making a marked distinction between poetic history and historical poetry. Poetic or poeticized history, he asserts, is poetry whose central “purpose is to make history ‘come alive,’ as it were, by rendering it in more accessible forms of literature” (1970, 3, 6). Historical poetry, on the other hand, is simply poetry “with history as its organizing metaphor.” It is the sort of poetry in which a poet uses historical materials the way Keats uses the nightingale, “as symbol or structuring principle in order to make a personal statement of his own, or put another way and more pompously, to reveal the universal in the particular.” Since Gutteridge considers his poem historical poetry, not poetic history, he

feels free to create a Riel in his own image. As he repudiates Lacey's criticism, "a work of art which interprets historical events in the light of their symbolic or mythical meanings obtains any validity it might have", not by respecting the external reality of its sources, but by being "'true'" to their spiritual reality and "by being simultaneously 'true' to the imaginative needs of its author at the time of the writing" (1970, 4, 7, 10).

Whatever merit Gutteridge's essay may have as literary criticism or theory, it is invaluable for making explicit what at times is only suggested in his poem. For example, in *Riel*, the poet has his protagonist explain why he "had *had* to kill" Tom Scott:

Scott had deserved death; for he was a symbol  
Of all that stood in the way of their hopes, the vision:  
Canadian, Orangeman, bigot, blasphemer,  
A man without root, with no touch of the soil  
In him or wind on him. (1968, 26)

In his essay, Gutteridge goes further and actually states that the Orangeman has to be executed not for what he has done but for what he is, for his unnatural relation to the land, what one might call his "Europeanness." To quote Gutteridge, "those strange men like Macdonald and Scott" did not merely oppose Riel but "pitted themselves so foolishly and ignominiously against the flow and circularity of Nature herself" (1970, 15). That is, their actions constitute not so much a crime as an abomination, a sin.

Gutteridge's essay is also quite important for the light it sheds on the poet's sense of his relationship to Riel, a relationship that he admits is largely mediated through Howard's work. For Gutteridge, the Montana writer not only captures "the essence of the Riel tragedy: the clash of cultures" but also "makes the white man feel ashamed, and fills the sensitive reader with a feeling

of tragic loss.” Howard thus “sides” with the First Nations and the Métis because he is captivated by their “mystical, humane, constructive, and socially harmonizing” idea of the land, a worldview “so powerful that it dissolved racial and language barriers in a way which from our present vantage-point seem marvellous” (1970, 13). Similarly, a deep appreciation of the Aboriginal “philosophy of land” is what leads Gutteridge to empathize so unequivocally with Riel, and his people. Regardless of their ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and political differences, the poet is convinced that he is in perfect harmony with his subject. As he states, “I am not Metis, do not speak French, am intractably presbyterian [sic], and have no plans to effect a revolution”, yet his national affinities with his protagonist enable him to “render Riel’s feelings because I conceived them partly as my own.” Ironically, this is the same ethnocultural transcendence that he does not grant to someone like Coulter. To quote Gutteridge, the reason that the Irish-born playwright failed to grasp Riel’s true significance was that he “was not a native Canadian”. Consequently, even though Coulter “had researched his material thoroughly (much more thoroughly than I ever could, or would), he had missed what Riel really was in Canadian terms. He had got his history straight. . . , but he had missed the meaning” (1970, 10, 11).

While Gutteridge’s identification with Riel appears to be a most positive development, it is actually quite problematic. In fact, it could be nothing less than a form of appropriation, a refusal to respect the Métis leader’s national specificity, his Otherness. In *La conquête de l’Amérique*, Tzvetan Todorov writes that “la problématique de l’altérité” operates at least on three levels. First, axiologically, “l’autre est bon ou mauvais, je l’aime ou je ne l’aime pas, ou, comme on dit plutôt à l’époque, il est mon égal ou il m’est inférieur”. Second, praxeologically, “j’embrasse les valeurs de l’autre, je m’identifie à lui; ou bien j’assimile l’autre à moi, je lui impose ma propre image”. Finally, epistemically, “je connais ou j’ignore l’identité de l’autre” (191). Gutteridge’s

relation to Riel definitely falls into the second category. As the poet acknowledges, his work is the direct result of “my desire to re-discover the peculiarly Canadian myths of my historical past” (1970, 9; 1973). However, as has become evident at least since Coulter’s groundbreaking play in 1950, Riel cannot be fully incorporated into the Canadian mythology without doing much violence to his own story, to his national identity as a Métis. That is, in order to be able to embrace Riel as a fellow citizen, Gutteridge must deny him.

In spite of its inescapable contradictions, Gutteridge’s genealogical embrace of Riel is far from being an anomaly in Canadian letters. Several other writers have also produced similar versions of the two North-West conflicts in which they make little attempt to camouflage their solidarity with the politician-mystic and their utter disgust for the politicians and settlers who opposed him. One of the more riveting of these is Mick Burrs’s *Moving in from Paradise* (1976), a series of interlinked (and unpaginated) short poems. For the U.S.-born Saskatchewan poet, Riel is not just a hero but a Canadian hero and, more specifically, a Western Canadian hero. He is the transethnic political leader who, on behalf of all “the people of the North-West/ Indians, Metis, Whites”, fights

for a new order on the prairie  
beneath the dancing lights of heaven  
with the singing spirits of God and earth

while other Christian strangers  
more conscious of the fashions of the day  
tried you at last for the murder of Scott

and called it treason against Her Majesty  
 called it Insurrection  
 and sentenced you

to spend your last moments of dignity  
 under a white hood--on their  
 dark gallows (1976, "Civil Service")

Riel is the patriot who sanctions the execution of Scott not because of the Orangeman's defiance of the Métis provisional government, "for insulting your leadership", but "for hindering the peace with Canada" (1976, "Red River").

Burrs's Riel is obviously a victim of racism. This is evident in the poet's depiction of Jack Henderson, the one-time Fort Garry prisoner who "swore vengeance/ for his compatriot Scott's execution" and "slept with hate his lover/ these fifteen years" for the simple satisfaction of putting "the hangman's knot under your ear" (1976, "The Volunteer"). Still, perhaps betraying his left-wing prairie populism, Burrs suggests that no one person is responsible for his protagonist's fate. As he says of the anonymous civil servant who is never available to meet with Riel, "His name doesn't matter./ It never has" (1976, "Civil Service"). While the poet does not go as far as another Saskatchewan writer, Kim Morrissey, who contends that there was no "deliberate villain at Batoche", that it was really "a bureaucratic bungle" (1985, 12-3), he appears ready to absolve even Macdonald of culpability in Riel's downfall. To quote Burrs, "The enemy is and was and will always be/ no single individual", not even the "wily" Prime Minister who "died/ calmly in bed" after "Riel was martyred, hung [sic] in Regina." Rather, the only party responsible for the tragedy of 1885 is not some politician or developer but the whole Canadian government, the government

that “declared” war “against the people of the West/ whites metis indians (1976, “Toward an Epic of the Rebellion that Was a War”). Or, as he states in another poem, the real culprit is “indifferent official Ottawa”, which deliberately ignored Riel’s grievances, forcing him to come to the realization that no diplomatic solution was possible (1976, “Civil Service”).

Actually, for Burrs, Riel is victimized not just by the Canadian government but by Western civilization itself. Even after acknowledging his protagonist’s role in the execution of Scott, he stresses that the Métis leader is killed solely “for serving your vision” (1976, “The Beast”). This is not surprising since, the poet states, we live in a science-dominated culture that has alienated us from our traditional ways of seeing ourselves and the world:

We say this is a myth  
so we do not have to believe in it.

Our science separates us, cuts off  
our brain from our dreaming heart,  
makes us worship at the altar of fact,

finds our children guilty of feeling,  
sentences our poets to death  
for visions. (1976, “The Horizon”)

Still, notwithstanding his disgust with Western logocentrism, the “institutional lethargy/ [which] writes the pages of history”, Burrs remains confident about Riel’s eventual rehabilitation. In his words, “hanged men are always reprieved/ one century too late” (1976, “Toward an Epic. . .”).

An even more firm belief in Riel’s ultimate redemption informs a song written about the

same time, Willie Dunn's "Louis Riel" (1976). A Micmac/ Métis, Dunn depicts Riel as a noble leader who returns to the Canadian North-West when he is made aware that the "people are hungry, the people need food." His community wishes him to destroy "the traders and the buffalo skinners," and he humbly obliges. However, when Riel seems about to address his people's concerns, he is undermined by external forces. Suspecting that he is "putting down the system," Ottawa decides to "[b]eat him, defeat him, roll him in the jail house right now" (48, 49). To quote Dunn's last stanza:

Well, the rest of the story has often been told.  
 They hung [sic] young Louis so brave and so bold,  
 Fought so hard, a-working for the people,  
 Giving his life, working for the people,  
 I know another man who did that too,  
 They hung [sic] him on a cross in Calvary,  
 Working for the people, against oppression,  
 And they took his life. (49)

In spite of the opposition to Riel by the local priests, who are "upset" about his activities, there is no question that the Métis leader is doing God's work on earth. Indeed, he may well be not just a political liberator but also a spiritual one, a second Christ (49).

The deification of the Métis leader, and the vilification of his opponents, continues in Janet Rosenstock and Dennis Adair's "novelization" *Riel* (1979). Based on a screenplay of the same name by Roy Moore, Rosenstock and Adair's work has been described as an attempt "to Harlequinize the West" (Swainson 1980, 295). As a historical fiction, it is such an egregious travesty that one feels tempted to dismiss it cursorily. However, *Riel* is the textual incarnation of a

lavish but largely uninspired CBC production and thus has some cultural significance. In addition to the fact that it was an “extraordinary success” with the public, drawing almost five million viewers, the work bears the imprimatur of a tax-supported Crown corporation and thus reveals how a sizable number of influential Canadian artists and bureaucrats felt that Riel--and his adversaries--should be portrayed at the end of the 1970s (Klooss 19; Casselman).

The two-part television series, which is directed by George Bloomfield and whose stellar cast includes Don Harron, Leslie Nielsen, Christopher Plummer, Jean-Louis Roux, and William Shatner, never disguises its political sympathies. For instance, in the written preamble to the film, either Moore or Bloomfield states that “Prime Minister Macdonald looked forward to the day” the Hudson’s Bay Company relinquished its title to the North-West to Canada “so that he could further his plans for a railroad and for Confederation.” The Prime Minister’s interest in the idea of a transcontinental railroad is further accentuated when a noticeably drunk Macdonald is introduced playing with a model train (Bloomfield, n.p.). In contrast, Riel is presented as a sober and God-fearing young man, a “civilized” leader whose only aim is to ensure that his people will be able to live in “freedom and dignity.” In his words to the various ethnocultural communities of Red River upon his return from Montreal, “There’s enough land here for all of us, and no need to fight over it.” To stress Riel’s ostensible Canadian patriotism, the screenwriter and the director even transfer his religious epiphany from Washington, D.C. to Montreal. As they have Macdonald confess, Riel is “a fascinating man--fascinating. He has vision, determination; he cares for his people, and has their trust.” In fact, when the recently-elected Riel sneaks into Parliament to sign the members’ register, it is Macdonald himself who supposedly escorts the M.P. for Provencher out of the building (Bloomfield, n.p.).

Rosenstock and Adair, likewise, establish their work’s tone at the very beginning. As they

write in their "Preface," they wish to transcend history, since it is not the history of a figure or event that is real but "the spirit of the history." The authors also dedicate their work "to all historians, who know better than anyone that history is the greatest of all fictions" (7-8). Although they do not expand on their belief in the inherent fictionality of history, it perhaps explains their capricious attitude toward the historical record. For Rosenstock and Adair, Riel fights not just for the Métis but for all Prairie First Nations. The self-styled Prophet of the New World, who unilaterally planned to move the Holy See from Rome to Saint Boniface, is also "dedicated to his church" (7). Similarly, the authors present Dumont as Riel's military commander both in Saskatchewan and at Red River, displacing in the latter clash the once beloved but now largely forgotten Ambroise Lépine (26-33; H. Adams 1995, 119). As they have one of their characters state, in an apparent justification of their own approach, "a story could be changed and still have truth" (25).

Perhaps even more conspicuous than Rosenstock and Adair's idealization of Riel, and the liberties they take with the historical past, is their undisguised contempt for Anglo-Canadian figures, from Macdonald to Scott. For the authors, the Orangeman is not just a racist and a bully but an unredeemable retrograde, "an uneducated labourer and surveyor, who ran whisky to the Indians for a living." Unlike the other Canadian settlers, Scott is quite versatile. To quote Dumont's semi-admiring assessment, "Scott was different. Scott did know how to survive [on the land]. The man was a rattlesnake, fast and dangerous" (50, 97). Yet, despite his physical dexterity, the Orangeman remains a rustic who cannot master even his native language. As Rosenstock and Adair's narrator comments, Riel not only spoke French with "the kind of accent a cultured Frenchman might have" but his command of "English was superior to Scott's. Scott, Louis knew, had been born to his English, but he was uneducated." Curiously, especially in light

of Scott's dream of becoming "one of the largest landowners" in the North-West once Canada acquires the territory, he is less interested in politics and real estate than he is in romance. In fact, like Constantin-Weyer's Riel, he is first and foremost a lover, although a monogamous one (63-4, 49).

The object of Scott's desire is Elizabeth Schultz, the wife of the Canada First militant and future lieutenant governor of Manitoba John Christian Schultz. A woman who appears to belong more in the 1970s than the 1870s, Elizabeth is a pragmatist who bears allegiance to no one but herself. She purportedly married the much older Schultz because he is "a man of influence" and now cavorts openly with Scott while her husband, in her words, is "busy making us rich." It is Elizabeth who incites Scott to shoot Riel, which he does but not very accurately, hitting "an oil lamp just above Louis' head" (49, 80, 92). After Scott is arrested by the Métis, while making love to her, Elizabeth meets with Riel, but not on her sexual partner's behalf. To quote her, "'Mr. Riel, I'm not here to plead for a lover, though he was hardly that. A little diversion, perhaps, but Tom Scott a lover?' She shook her head" (100). Her concern is not that Scott might be executed but rather the impact that such an execution might have on the English-speaking community. As she explains to the Métis leader, drawing an analogy between her private life and Red River's political reality:

Marriage is an unnatural state, Mr. Riel. . . . We are the only species of God's creation that insists on such confinement. Without compassion, without recognizing one another's needs, that state can become imprisonment. If your people and mine are destined to that kind of marriage, may God have mercy on us!

(101)

Elizabeth's words, though, fail to move her righteous interlocutor. Offended that such a "woman

could so easily invoke the name of God,” Riel goes to church that very evening and prays for hours to the Lord whose heart he knows “opened to all of them--the Métis, the Indians, even the English” (100-1).

Rosenstock and Adair’s Macdonald too is a most venal individual, a politician who is far less interested in people than he is in business, particularly railroad business. Actually, the Prime Minister is supposed to provoke a confrontation with Riel and the Métis in order to be able to conclude the transcontinental rail line that he believes will unite “Canada from sea to sea.” As he callously addresses Donald Smith after news reaches Ottawa of an “Indian and Métis uprising” in Saskatchewan, “We will get our railroad, won’t we?” Smith suggests that “fighting a war to build a railway is probably not the best way to. . .”. However, the ever-pragmatic Macdonald retorts that it is not his fault that Riel has returned to Canada to incite trouble. In any case, he is washing his hands of the situation, for “we need the railway and now Parliament will vote us the funds! It’s just making the best of a bad mess!” Or as he acknowledges subsequently, “I’m an opportunist too. I’ve used this to move the railroad farther west” (36, 161-2, 175).

So intent are the authors on ensuring that Macdonald does not emerge unscathed from his confrontation with Riel that they have him lose a member of his own family at Batoche, even if they have to contradict history in the process. The retribution they reserve for the Prime Minister is the death of his son Hugh John, a volunteer with the Canadian forces who allegedly perishes of “scarlet fever” (183). To give Rosenstock and Adair credit, Hugh John did enlist in both North-West conflicts (Wilson 9-14, 23-6). The younger Macdonald, who was the only one of the Prime Minister’s children to survive to adulthood, admittedly was also not too sympathetic to the Métis or their leader. As he expresses his regret that Riel surrendered to the Canadian scouts, “Had our fellows taken him he would have been brought in a coffin and all trouble about his trial would

have been avoided” (qtd. in Wilson 26). In fact, the acutely Anglocentric Hugh John did not seem to look favourably on many people of non-British stock, striving to keep “Canada for Canadians” by, amongst other measures, curtailing “Slavic immigration” (Wilson 37-8). Still, the junior Macdonald’s death at Batoche is particularly egregious since Hugh John would not only become premier of Manitoba but also the province’s police court magistrate, a position that enabled him to fight the “dangerous foreign ‘Bolsheviki’” during the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 (Wilson 36-45).

Rosenstock and Adair’s *Riel*, along with Gutteridge’s poem of the same name, epitomizes the utter lionization of the Métis leader as a Canadian patriot, a selfless “humanitarian” who was vanquished by petty politicians. This is a trend that persists to this day. In works like Kevin Roberts’s short poem “Riel” (1985), it is not just the hero’s adversaries who are unnatural but Canada itself. In the poet’s words, “Riel who put his mouth on the muzzle/ and cried for liberty straight/ down the barrel”, was opposed by:

..... the stolid

Loyalist wall

John A and the need for

CANADA

*a mare [sic] usque ad mare*

railway economics

irrational steel lines

denying the natural flow

North South geese/buffalo &

people who follow

seasons of flesh (182)

Similarly, in *The Missing Bell of Batoche* (1994), a play by the Métis writer Bob Rock, Riel is the New World David who miraculously achieves a “small victory over [the Canadian] Goliath” and who passionately advocates not just “Metis land-entitlement and self-government” but even “free trade and multiculturalism.” The Canadian government, on the other hand, is the political body that “most certainly could have avoided bloodshed and rebellion with a few thousand dollars spent on food supplies and a few weeks explaining the new land survey to the Metis people” but which deliberately chose to do otherwise (12, 37). Finally, in the unpublished *Debout mon peuple!* (1992), an interactive play produced at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Riel is the focus of a theatrical version of his trial in which the audience-jury invariably declares him innocent. To quote a critique of one of the productions, “Il est dommage que des jeunes spectateurs contemporains n’aient pas été membres du jury lors des délibérations d’antan car aujourd’hui, Louis Riel n’est presque jamais condamné” (Beddows 29).

Riel’s rehabilitation is thus virtually complete, at least as far as his place in the pantheon of Canadian heroes is concerned. For most contemporary Canadian writers who have dealt with the subject, the apparent Otherness of the Métis leader is simply a non-issue. Riel may have shown remarkable reluctance to become part of Canada, even leading two military confrontations against it, yet he seems to have emerged as the ultimate Canadian hero. This newly-acquired Canadianism is not unproblematic, however, for it inevitably calls into question the patriotism of the settlers, politicians, and volunteers who opposed him in the name of Canada. As Francis J.P. French, the grandson of a Saskatchewan captain killed at Batoche, reflected when the Canadian government decided to honour Riel with a stamp in 1969:

The problem which now arises is this: when a nation rewrites its history, (the USSR has been in the news recently for having done just that) and the old Bad Guys become Good Guys, what then is the status of the old Good Guys who were charged with the responsibility of undoing the old Bad Guys--a responsibility delegated by the legal national government of the day? Does a reciprocal change in status occur, or do the old Good Guys become non-persons? (6)

French notes that as a young boy he was frequently told that "my grandfather had given his life for his country," that he had been killed by "a traitor's bullet. . .--they also used terms like 'traitor' when I was a schoolboy, and so did my history books." He is therefore perplexed by the present "status" of his forebear, since "I find that it is just as difficult to regard my grandfather as a traitor as it is to accept the idea that he never existed!" As he concludes, "If the stamp now establishes Riel as a Good Citizen, would not those who were out to get him automatically become posthumous Bad Citizens?" Indeed, should his grandfather "be given a public hanging in effigy, to atone for his misguided actions of 1885" (6).

French's concerns, though, are rather atypical. Far more reflective of the transformation undergone in modern Canadian culture by the main participants in the two North-West conflicts is the assertion by Rudy Wiebe that, at least in recent Western Canadian fiction, "Macdonald (born in Scotland) becomes a conniving bastard. . . and Riel a saint" (1978). Wiebe's judgment, actually, is not quite correct. While Riel may have become the most popular figure in Canadian history, there are still reservations about some aspects of his personality. Particularly among Prairie writers, on both sides of the international border, there has been a growing suspicion that the Métis leader is not Western enough; that, in spite of his Red River birth, he is simply too intellectual, too Eastern, indeed, too white. This is a trend that begins with Howard's *Strange*

*Empire* in 1952, is reinforced in Woodcock's biography of Dumont two decades later (1975), and culminates in the fictions of E.H. Carefoot (1973), Ken Mitchell (1985), and Alfred Silver (1990), in which Riel's role is either ignored in favour of Dumont's or openly denigrated. Even Riel's views on the First Nations have begun to be seriously scrutinized. For example, in *Loyal till Death: Indians and the Northwest Rebellion*, Blair Stonechild and Bill Waiser contend that, instead of being "a champion of aboriginal peoples", Riel perceived the First Nations as his own "foot soldiers--the means by which he would realize his mission and deliver his people" (77).

The aspect of Riel's life and thought about which Canadian writers have been the most divided, however, is his state of mind in general and his religious ideas in particular. For authors like Livesay, and especially Wiebe, Riel is an enlightened but misunderstood religious mystic. He is a modern-day Abel who perishes at the hands of his less sedentary sibling Cain, for "[i]t is in the very bones of human existence that the literate agrarian always destroys the oral hunter" (Wiebe 1992, 14). Other writers, such as the playwright Michael Hollingsworth, are less charitable, presenting him as an unbalanced megalomaniac with a proclivity to utter inanities like, "From out of the flock comes the shepherd. And I am he as you are me" (204). Perhaps it is fitting that Canadian poets, playwrights, and novelists would continue to have serious disagreements about Riel's mental state. After all, this was the subject that concerned the Métis leader the most after the fall of Batoche, particularly once he became aware of the imminence of his death.

## Chapter VI

### The Mystic/ Madman: Riel as a Pararational Individual

Always beware the leader  
 who talks with God  
 and leaves you to do the dirty work.  
 Raymond Souster (1958-60)

Along with his efforts to demonstrate that he was a child of the North-West and that he was divinely inspired, Riel's central concern late in his life was the desire to prove that he was not insane. The question of the Métis leader's mental state became especially prominent in his two addresses at the 1885 trial, one before the jury and the other just to the judge after he had been found guilty of high treason and sentenced to death. As Riel began his first address, "It would be easy for me to-day to play insanity, because the circumstances are such as to excite any man," and to "justify me not to appear as usual, but with my mind out of its ordinary condition." However, he refused to exploit the legal-psychiatric technicalities and decided to attempt to persuade the court that he possessed a "sound mind" (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 311, 324). In fact, rather than agreeing with his attorneys to plead innocent by reason of insanity, Riel charged that it was the Canadian government that was "insane and irresponsible". To quote him, "I have acted reasonably

and in self-defence, while the Government, my accuser, being irresponsible, and consequently insane, cannot but have acted wrong, and if high treason there is it must be on its side and not on my part” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 324).

Riel’s determination to have the court formally pronounce him mentally competent was not merely a personal whim. He of course wished to spare both his family and his people the stigma of being associated with a lunatic, saying that it “would be a great consolation for my mother, for my wife, for my children. . . , even for my protectors, for my countrymen” that he would “not be executed as an insane man.” More significantly, he knew that he had to be judged of sound mind if he were to have political legitimacy. Throughout the trial Riel declared that he had a divine “mission,” that God had chosen him as “an instrument to help men in my country” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 351, 314). At the same time, he also realized that in order for people to accept that he was truly God’s earthly agent they must believe he was mentally capable. Thus, he even appeared to welcome a guilty verdict, for it supposedly proved that he was sane and, therefore, God’s elect. To quote him again:

I suppose that after having been condemned, I will cease to be called a fool, and for me, it is a great advantage. I consider it as a great advantage. If I have a mission--I say ‘if,’ for the sake of those who doubt, but for my part it means ‘since,’ since I have a mission, I cannot fulfil my mission as long as I am looked upon as an insane being--human being, as the moment I begin to ascent that scale I begin to succeed. (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 350-1)

Or, as he added, the guilty verdict confirmed that “I am more than ordinary myself”. At least “to a certain number of people. . . , [it] is a proof that maybe I am a prophet, maybe Riel is a prophet,

he suffered enough for it” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 351-2).

Despite Riel’s passionate appeals to be cleared of “the stain of insanity,” most psychiatrists have always judged him to be mentally unbalanced (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 351; Flanagan 1977, 1985). Starting in 1876, Dr. Henry Howard admitted Riel to the Longue Pointe Asylum because he considered the patient “a fool, in virtue of a teratological defect in his psycho-physical organization” (641). At the trial itself, Dr. François Roy of the Beauport Asylum stated persistently that Riel suffered from “megalomania”, and was in no “condition to be the master of his acts”. As evidence, Roy cited the fact that he and his staff “never could prove” to the would-be Prophet of the New World that his “mission never existed” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 244, 246, 254). The defence’s other psychiatric expert, Dr. Daniel Clark of the Toronto Lunatic Asylum, agreed, asserting that any individual who held the accused’s views and who performed the acts he did “must certainly be of insane mind.” Clark further contended that Riel’s prophetic writings are not similar to those of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, or even Muhammad’s, since the latter’s books are consistent with “common sense” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 257, 261; Clark 50). Writing from Paris a year after the trial, from information provided to him by a Quebec colleague, Dr. Henri Gilson identified the Métis leader as suffering from a “*manie chronique à forme religieuse*” and then concluded that had the case been tried “*dans notre pays, un homme comme Riel vivrait encore, interné dans un asile, mais protégé par la loi*” (59-60).

Perhaps one could attribute the psychiatric profession’s uniformity regarding Riel’s mental state to its infancy as a discipline. The first psychiatrists to analyze Riel certainly make some curious statements that seem to reveal more about the authorities, and their times, than they do about the Métis leader. For instance, Roy, after stating that he was the “medical superintendent”

of the Beauport Asylum and that he had studied the mental disease megalomania, declared that “I am not an expert in insanity” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 244, 251). Clark testified that “it is all nonsense to talk about a man not knowing what he is doing, simply because he is insane” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 257). Finally, in a comment that should be of much comfort to anyone who makes a living by the pen, Gilson stated that the proof of Riel’s insanity lay partly in the fact that, like “tous aliénés. . . , il a la manie d’écrire” (56).

The psychiatric consensus about Riel’s insanity was not restricted to the late nineteenth century, however, but has held well into the present. Toronto’s Dr. C.K. Clarke, after whom that city’s Clarke Institute of Psychiatry is named, claimed in 1905 that the Métis leader’s fate was “sealed” at Regina not for psychiatric reasons but for political ones. In his words, the “mass of testimony pointing to Riel’s” paranoia is so immense that one “wonders that there could have been the slightest discussion regarding it” (388, 18). Another Toronto psychiatrist, Dr. E.R. Markson, in the mid-1960s diagnosed Riel as “a victim of his own prophetic and megalomaniac zeal,” an illness whose most common symptom was “the unmitigated idealization of both his mother and father” (248, 251). Soon after, Drs. Édouard Desjardins and Charles Dumas, the latter a Montreal psychiatrist, pronounced Riel a “schizophrène paranoïaque.” According to their long, two-part essay, the politician-mystic was an “instable, à tendances dictatoriales,” afflicted by a “mono-manie religieuse”, who would never have been executed except for the “fanatisme” of his Orange enemies (1656, 1872). In turn, writing on the centenary of the hanging, Dr. Camille Laurin classified Riel as psychotic. A psychiatrist and politician best known as the architect of Quebec’s French language charter, Laurin found evidence of Riel’s mental instability in his “incohérent, décousu, [et] répétitif” address to the court after he was condemned to death. Laurin

also maintained that, unlike the Canadian government's, the Métis leader's strategy at the trial was extremely successful, for "en niant toute maladie mentale Loius Riel établissait la crédibilité de son personnage et sa cause". In fact, rather than being vanquished at Regina, Riel emerged as the "seul gagnant", having "sauvé le sens de sa vie en la sacrifiant et en la perdant" (5, 6).

In contrast to the psychiatrists, the lay and medical people who interacted with Riel in the last days of his life had a considerably more positive view of his mental state. For Captain George Holmes Young, the officer entrusted with escorting Riel from Batoche to Regina and the son of the Methodist clergyman who ministered to Tom Scott at Red River, the prisoner was anything but emotionally unstable. As Young told the court, "I found that I had a mind against my own, and fully equal to it; better educated and much more clever than I was myself. He would stop and evade answering questions with the best possible advantage" (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 277-8). General Middleton, the commander of the Canadian forces, also testified that, far from being of an unsound mind, Riel "was a man of rather acute intellect. He seemed quite able to hold his own upon any argument or topic we happened to touch upon" (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 281). Likewise, Dr. Augustus Jukes, the Mounted Police's senior surgeon, affirmed that "I have never seen anything during my intercourse with Mr Riel to leave any impression upon my mind that he was insane." Indeed, in an apparent reply to Daniel Clark, Jukes asserted that the fact that Riel believed he was in direct communion with God did not necessarily prove he was insane. As he noted, "There are men who have held very remarkable views with respect to religion and who have been always declared to be insane until they gathered together great numbers of followers and became leaders of a new sect, then they became great prophets and great men" (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 270, 272).

Similar conclusions were reached by the three-member medical commission that Prime Minister Macdonald appointed to examine Riel's state of mind after the trial. The commission, comprising Jukes as well as Dr. François-Xavier Valade, an Ottawa physician, and Dr. Michael Lavell, the warden and surgeon at Ontario's Kingston Penitentiary, had a specific mandate. Its aim was not to establish if the Métis leader was "sane when his treasons were committed and at the time of the trial"--questions supposedly already answered by the jury--but only whether he was at present "sufficiently a reasonable and accountable man to know right from wrong" (Macdonald 1885, 2; Stanley 1963-7). Jukes again reckoned that Riel was mentally capable, although he stressed to Macdonald that "I confess I should be well pleased if justice and popular clamour could be satisfied without depriving this man of life" (qtd. in Stanley 1936, 367). Lavell too reached the conclusion that, while "holding & expressing foolish & peculiar views as to religion and general government, [Riel] is an accountable being & capable of distinguishing right from wrong" (15). Like his colleagues, Valade stated that Riel was mentally competent, but with one significant difference. He believed that the Métis leader could not "distinguish between right and wrong on politico-religious questions", and thus was "not fit to perceive the crime of High Treason of which he had been guilty" (125, 127). However, when Valade outlined his position in a telegram to Macdonald, either the Prime Minister or his staff deleted the line about "politico-religious questions", creating the impression that the commission was unanimous (J. Howard 552; Flanagan 1976, 116).

While more than a century has elapsed since Riel's hanging, the matter of his mental state appears no closer to being satisfactorily resolved today than it did at the time of his death. Some writers and scholars argue forcefully that he was "unstable" or "mad" (Schafer 18; Thomas 48);

others, including two of his most recent biographers, aver no less passionately that he was “not insane” (Siggins 417; Flanagan 1977, 32; 1985, 18). Sometimes contradictory positions are taken not just by different writers but by the same author. George Woodcock, for example, has made the perceptive observation that “we have long given up the idea of William Blake as a madman, and yet Riel uttered few things more extravagant than the *Prophetic Books*” (1980, 17-8). Still, the same Woodcock then concedes that “Riel may have had periods of mental disorder, and even of what is generally considered madness.” Indeed, the late West Coast critic states that the reason the Saskatchewan Métis were doomed when they invited the hero of Red River to Batoche was that they failed to discern “the veering in Riel’s mind away from rationality” (1980, 18; 1975, 13). In other words, Riel was not quite mad, but he was not quite sane either.

One of the great ironies about Riel’s life is the fact that it was not his enemies who strove most intensely to show that he was “crazy/ The francophone and the Metis” but rather his friends and allies (Cuthand; Flanagan 1977, 35). The Canadian government, as Riel gratefully acknowledged, undertook “to prove that I am a reasonable man”. His own lawyers, on the other hand, attempted nothing less than to demonstrate that he was “entirely insane and irresponsible for his acts” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 351, 295). Headed by François Lemieux and Charles Fitzpatrick, two brilliant young Quebec City attorneys destined to become respectively Chief Justice of Quebec and Chief Justice of Canada, Riel’s counsel was recruited by his Quebec supporters once they realized that he had again become “the symbol of the French-English quarrel in Canada” (Stanley 1963, 342). Riel was certain that the two jurists would win the case, which would mark both his personal victory and that of the Conservative Party--the party headed by his nemesis, Prime Minister Macdonald--over the Liberals. In his words, with his exoneration, “Le

triomphe du parti conservateur sera grand sur ses antagonistes” (III, 111-2). However, after Lemieux and Fitzpatrick’s first interview with their client, the two attorneys became convinced that their only line of defence was insanity, since Riel was “un maniaque religieux”, “un fou ou un sacré hypocrite--peut-être les deux” (qtd. in Stanley 1963, 420, 344). Indeed, in his final address to the jury before sentencing, Fitzpatrick himself provided the court with an extensive list of the reasons why Riel was mentally incompetent: from the Métis leader’s decision to attack “the whole power of the Dominion of Canada, with a [sic] power of Britain behind her back”, through his “insane delusion” that he was “called and vested by God, for the purposes of chastising Canada and of creating a new country and a new kingdom here,” to his venality in attempting to extract bribes from Ottawa in order “to rouse up the foreign nations to enable him to come in here and take possession of the country” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 297, 300-2). As Fitzpatrick concluded by appealing to the patriotism of the jurors, his fellow “British subjects,” he knew that they would not send Riel to “the gallows” and “hang him high in the face of all the world,” for it was evident to everyone in the court that the defendant was “a poor confined lunatic; a victim, gentlemen, of oppression or the victim of fanaticism” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 311).

Even more critical than the intervention of Riel’s legal counsel was the testimony of the Franco-Catholic clergy. Unlike the Quebec lawyers, who as Riel attested were well-meaning but came from “a far province” and were unacquainted with the local realities (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 205-7), the priests were extremely knowledgeable about the North-West. The Breton-born Father André, for instance, seems to have become almost de-Europeanized. After ministering to the Métis for twenty-five years, on both sides of the international line, the missionary sported an “unkempt beard and greasy cassock” and his manners had become “abrupt from much contact

with the wily redskins. He was the very antithesis to the courtly abbé, of the glowing land of his youth” (Donkin 187). Yet André, like his fellow priests, was no less categorical than the lawyers about Riel being mentally unstable. As the director of the Prince Albert Mission testified, concerning “all other matters,” such as literature and science, Riel “was in his ordinary state of mind.” However, “Upon politics and religion he was no longer the same man. It would seem as if there were two men in him, he lost all control of himself upon these questions” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 232). Father Vital Fourmond made a similar point, stating that “it appeared as if there were two men in the prisoner.” Although Riel could be extremely courteous and rational in private conversation, if contradicted about “affairs of politics and government. . . , he became a different man and would be carried away with his feelings” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 240; Frémont 1953, 102-9).

The Catholic priests, of course, were not disinterested. Hailing chiefly from France, they were acutely aware of being guests in a predominantly English-speaking and Protestant country. The magnitude of their vulnerability is conspicuously evident when André rationalized the murder of the two “saints prêtres” at Frog Lake as God’s willful decision to “exonérer le clergé catholique de toute accusation de complicité avec les insurgés et pour prouver au monde que ce mouvement insurrectionnel a été tramé autant contre la religion que contre le gouvernement” (qtd. in Le Chevalier 172). Nevertheless, it would be facile to characterize the clergy’s contention that Riel was insane as being purely motivated by political expediency. The Métis leader’s mother may have been positive that her son was practicing “sa religion” and that “je le prouverai un jour, au ciel” (qtd. in Rivard 8). Yet the fact is that there were significant theological conflicts between the politician-mystic and not only the priests but also most orthodox Catholics. To quote Louis

Schmidt, Riel's schoolmate in Quebec and his former secretary at Red River, Riel had become "un véritable fanatique" who professed "ouvertement des idées hérétiques et révolutionnaires." Indeed, the increasingly influential Riel had diverged so much from the Church, even "sur les points de doctrine", that if he were not compelled to leave the Canadian North-West, "beaucoup de nos métis deviendront infidèles. . . . Le grand nombre le suivront partout; il se ferait schismatique avec lui" (1884-5, 29789, 29808).

For André and Fourmond, as for their co-religionists across the country, the proof of Riel's mental instability was his open defiance of the Catholic Church. Riel may have perceived the accusations of madness levelled against him as a mere refusal to accept his religious ideas. In his words to the court, his only lunacy was his Christian ecumenism:

As to my religion, what is my belief? What is my insanity about that? My insanity, your Honors, gentlemen of the jury, is that I wish to leave Rome aside, inasmuch as it is the cause of division between Catholics and Protestants. . . . If I have any influence in the new world it is to help in that way and even if it takes 200 years to become practical, then after my death that will bring out practical results, and then my children's children will shake hands with the Protestants of the new world in a friendly manner. I do not wish these evils which exist in Europe to be continued, as much as I can influence it, among the half-breeds. I do not wish that repeated in America. (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 319)

The clergy, however, interpreted his views not as some form of pan-Christianity but as apostasy. For, by denying the need for sacerdotal mediation between himself and God, Riel rejected not only Catholic dogma but also the Church's earthly representatives. That is, he became a 'usurper

of the priestly function” (Huel 15). To quote Fourmond, Riel “did not admit the doctrines of the church, of the divine presence”, and threatened that, after reclaiming the North-West, “he was to go to Italy and overthrow the Pope and then he would choose another Pope of his own making.” Or as André comments, concerning religion, Riel “was his own judge. . . . He believed himself infallible” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 240-1, 234).

Although clearly self-serving, the Catholic clergy’s response to Riel after his surrender to the Canadian forces was not an uncomplicated one. This was particularly true of André, one of Riel’s most vocal critics at Batoche who later became the Métis leader’s most frequent visitor at the Regina prison and “[m]on zélé confesseur” (Riel IV, 429; Donkin 187; Le Chevallier 171-5, 263-71). To the very end, André was adamant that it would be “dangereux” to free Riel, since the politician-mystic was bound to expose “la paix publique à de grands dangers.” At the same time, the priest contended that it would be “un crime impardonnable” to execute Riel, an abomination that would leave “une tache de sang sur l’histoire du Canada” (qtd. in Le Chevallier 264). André provided two main reasons why the Métis leader should not be killed. First, the Canadian government was largely responsible for the events of 1885. As he told the court, federal indifference to Métis petitions and resolutions “produced a great dissatisfaction in the minds of the people” (qtd. in D. Morton 1974, 229). Or as he explained elsewhere, despite Ottawa’s protestations to the contrary, “c’est sa négligence coupable qui a attiré Riel dans le pays”. More crucially, Riel should not be executed because he was “réellement et vraiment toqué”. The definite proof that the Métis leader was mentally unstable, André insisted, lay in the religious ideas to which he had fallen prey. For no sooner did Riel retract his “blasphèmes” than he relapsed again and began claiming that God had anointed him a “prophète” with “une mission spéciale à remplir.”

In the priest's words, "Impossible de raisonner avec lui sur ce point; il se rend quand je le menace de le priver de ses sacrements, mais le lendemain les mêmes idées reviennent sur le tapis" (qtd. in *Le Chevallier* 282, 263).

The Catholic clergy's conclusion that Riel's religious heterodoxy proved he was insane, and therefore that his execution was a crime, made a notable imprint in the French-speaking parts of Canada. While most nineteenth-century Quebec writers came to accept that the Métis leader's hanging was politically motivated, they were rather ambivalent about the man and his ideas. Like Schmidt, they tended to believe that in his "guerre ouverte" with the Church's hierarchy, the politician-mystic, "sans s'en apercevoir sans doute, fait. . . l'oeuvre de Satan" (1884-5, 29808). However, they were suspicious not just about his religious beliefs but also about his political ones. To cite an editorial in a Montreal newspaper at the time, Riel's mission was both "antichrétienne et antinationale" (qtd. in Frémont 1953, 178). Since they disapproved fundamentally of much of what Riel stood for, those writers were thus forced to concentrate on his political martyrdom and his alleged insanity, an insanity for which they at times appear to hold him responsible. As Jean Morisset notes, after the fall of Batoche, "La seule véritable réponse que la Franco-Amérique a toujours proposée par ailleurs est la suivante. Oui, Riel était fou. Et non-seulement l'était-il, mais il était coupable de l'être" (1997, 94; Grandin et. al.).

Actually, the first significant sympathetic portrayal of Riel as a religious figure does not appear in French but in English, Anne Mercier and Violet Watt's *The Red House by the Rockies: A Tale of Riel's Rebellion* (1896?). Published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, a Church of England missionary organization among whose objectives was "to convert the Indian Nations. . . and to deale [sic] with them for their soul's good" (Allen and McClure 24), the novel

is an overtly pious tract. As the authors describe the prairie to the reader, “the Maker’s presence seems very real, and, in the awful yet soothing calm, it is impossible to doubt that there must have been a Mighty Hand at work in the formation of things” (34). *The Red House*, which is set in what is now southern Alberta in the 1880s, focuses mainly on a group of genteel British settlers. Yet, as it depicts the challenges faced by the new arrivals as they attempt to make the country “our own,” it shows them as being surprisingly aware of the fact that they have acquired their new land by dispossessing other peoples, the First Nations and the Métis. As one settler explains to his daughter, the First Nations usually “keep quiet” on their reserves, “but we must not suppose they feel friendly to us, who have turned them out of their land, and now keep them like animals in a pen.” Or as the authors themselves contextualize the situation, there have been no real rebellions in Canada, such as Sitting Bull’s at Little Bighorn, but only “the small struggles of a conquered race. . . , feeble risings, soon put down.” Nevertheless, the First Nations “give trouble for a time, and are proof of hatred, hatred deep and inextinguishable, in the Red people against the White race that are crushing them out of life” (53, 41, 49).

Mercier and Watt’s sensitivity to the European dispossession of the First Nations is also evident in their characterization of Riel. While a peripheral figure, the Métis leader is portrayed in a remarkably positive manner. For instance, Riel is presented as being “the son of a brave old fellow, a half-breed himself, a ‘village Hampden’. . . who stood up nobly for his people in his day.” He is a sort of Cromwell who, even though he is certain to be defeated, “will have the honour of doing a brave deed before he falls” (53-7). But, in contrast to both Cromwell and Hampden, the seventeenth-century English firebrand immortalized by Thomas Gray (Gray 39), Riel abhors violence. He is that rarity, a brave but caring political leader who cannot bear “the

shedding [of] the blood of others” and who undertakes his public career “only from generosity and a sense of duty” (110-1). Moreover, not only is Riel “a patriot” and “a good man” but he is also definitely not mad, the “pretext of partial insanity” being “raised in order to save his life” (57, 117, 125). Indeed, Mercier and Watt write that the Métis leader’s death is less a miscarriage of justice than a sacrifice, an offering to which they are positive he would joyfully assent. In their words:

Perhaps the execution was a necessity, though a sad and stern one, for peace was restored among the half-breeds, and no further struggle has arisen. Thus one man’s death may have saved many lives. And if so, it is what Riel would have chosen; for he took his life in his hand when he followed those who called him from his home to lead them and redress their grievances. Government needs stern measures at times, but we may yet feel a glow of pity and admiration for those who, even in error, arise at the call of their race or land, and give themselves up for other. (125-6)

Or, as the authors conclude, in a note suffused with the Christian piety that pervades their work, “we may hope that Louis Riel found mercy at the Highest Tribunal of all” (126).

*The Red House by the Rockies*, though, is an exception among representations of Riel. Instead of continuing to be portrayed as a Christ-like political leader who gives his life for his people, he virtually disappears from the public consciousness for much of the first half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, when Canadian writers finally rediscover him, in the aftermath of World War II, they tend to focus almost exclusively on his political role, whether as a victim of Confederation or as a cultural mediator. The few mid-century works that approach the question

of Riel's mental state, such as Patrick Anderson's "Poem on Canada" (1946), tend to do so rather perfunctorily. To quote Anderson, "And Riel, not mad. *Pas fou*." In fact, the poet asserts that the only reason the Métis leader is "ordered hanged as a traitor" is that he forsakes his legal counsel's advice and "madness forever" and proudly claims responsibility for his actions "for freedom and the Metis" (39).

A lengthier work that explores Riel's state of mind, although still peripherally, is Edward McCourt's *The Flaming Hour* (1947). Set in the foothills of the Canadian Rockies on the eve of the North-West Rebellion, McCourt's novel deals primarily with the trials of the white settlers and the Mounted Police. However, among those newcomers there is a most unusual character, an idealistic--or mentally unbalanced--Methodist minister named Steven Conway. Of Irish extraction, as his surname suggests, Conway is a self-declared rebel, like "[a]ll good Irishmen". Thus, even though he has been preaching among the Peigans for fifteen years, and claims to have "saved the souls of a few of them", he is rather ambivalent if not about his faith at least about his fellow Christians and white people in general. As he describes the challenges faced by anyone attempting to convert First Nations people to Christianity, "The Indians think of Christ as the white man's God, and knowing the white man as they do, they're bound to distrust his God. And it would be so easy to save them--if it weren't for the Christians." Or as he explains why he disapproves of the Mounted Police's edict forbidding the area's First Nations to hold their sacred Sundance, "We've taken everything else from them" (1947, 33, 43, 20).

Needless to say, Conway's views are not widely shared in the larger white community. For example, most settlers and police officers dread the prospect of an uprising by the First Nations and the Métis. As the wife of a former British Army major expresses their moral outrage, "Think

of those wretched Indians fighting against the dear Queen!” Conway, on the other hand, appears to welcome such a confrontation, saying that if any turmoil does materialize “we’ll have no one but ourselves to blame” (1947, 34-5). Indeed, the minister intimates that a war between the First Nations and the settlers is not only probable but inevitable, considering both the political conflicts and cultural differences between the two groups. According to Conway, “The Indians are poets. That’s one reason why we don’t understand them.” Another reason the two groups fail to communicate, of course, is that the First Nations claim title to the land and resources that the settlers covet. In his words, “Everywhere the Indian stands between the white man and the satisfaction of his greed. That’s his only crime. But from the white man’s point of view there is none greater” (1947, 24, 42).

Conway also states that the oppressed First Nations, whom “we’ve been driving . . . off the plains, stealing their food. . . , doing our best to destroy. . . body and soul”, are particularly likely to revolt against the white occupiers if “Riel returns to lead [sic] them”. Yet the minister is not that sanguine about the Métis leader, no doubt due to the fact that the latter possesses European blood. As Conway responds when asked if Riel is white, “The rotten half of him is”. Still, in spite of his serious misgivings about the individual he describes as “[t]wo-thirds idealist, one-third madman”, Conway is unreservedly supportive of the cause. After all, even though Riel “has done some evil things. . . , there’s a sort of justice to his side”. “In many ways he’s mean and petty and stupid. But he’s a man with a dream, and. . . no man is ignoble who fights in a worthy cause. And the cause of the Metis and Indians is worthy” (1947, 43, 35, 42). Nevertheless, Conway’s motivation for supporting the politician-mystic remains a perplexing one. The minister recognizes that if “the Indians rise under Riel, there will be bloodshed for sure and some men will die and

Riel will be defeated.” Yet, since he is convinced the First Nations are destined to wither “away into extinction”, he feels that it would be more appropriate if they “disappeared from the earth in one last great, flaming hour of destruction.” Therefore, to precipitate that final conflagration, Conway begins to raid the local cattle ranches so that he can arm “my children,” the Peigans and the Bloods, and with them help Riel to stop the Canadian government and people from “steal[ing] the land from the Metis” (1947, 43-4, 91).

The one white person who is aware of Conway’s direct involvement with Riel, but not of his cattle rustling, is his lover Judith Sumner. The local school teacher, Sumner believes that Riel is “not altogether bad--far from it--but he’s got a twisted brain” and also that “the Indians will rise if the Metis do” (1947, 75). Thus she attempts to have the Mounted Police intercept the Métis leader at the border, hoping to eliminate the possibility of Conway becoming entangled in any military challenge to the Canadian state. But that plan fails for a series of reasons, and she seems resigned to allow events to unfold as they may. However, when Sumner learns that Conway not only approves of Riel’s struggle but, in order to support it, is robbing his friends and neighbours--even seriously wounding one of them--she realizes that he must be stopped. Consequently, she follows Conway to the Peigan reserve and, while he addresses a large gathering of armed would-be warriors, “every able-bodied male of the tribe”, she shoots him to death, basically ending any further talk of the Peigans and other members of the Blackfoot Confederacy joining the Métis. As Sumner justifies her actions, she kills the man “I loved” because she was unable to convince him that, even if the First Nations “rebelled, there would be no quick, clean end--only defeat and greater misery. I could never make him see how useless it would have been, how much more suffering it would have meant” (1947, 157, 61, 167).

In *The Flaming Hour*, which has been characterized by one of the author's critics as "a delightful but inconsequential story" (R. Baldwin 580), McCourt clearly conveys mixed political messages. A respected Saskatchewan literary scholar and novelist, McCourt does not appear to be unsympathetic to Riel. As he writes in his subsequent fictionalized life of the Métis leader, "Whatever his faults, whatever his crimes--and they were many--his dream was not ignoble. . . . He believed passionately in the nationhood of his people; and for that belief he died" (1958, 159). Yet for someone who professes to admire the subject, he elects to tell Riel's story not from his perspective but from that of a white man. Moreover, this white man, Conway, is not nearly as benevolent as both he and the author seem to believe. Like the other settlers, and late nineteenth-century North American society in general (Francis 23-4), the minister is certain that the First Nations are destined to vanish. His only fundamental disagreement with people like the ex-British officer and his wife is the length of the process. As Sumner encapsulates Conway's views, "He always felt that way about the Indians. . . , always. Better a quick clean end than a slow, lingering death down through the years and generations." Still, Conway supposedly has such an overwhelming influence over the First Nations people to whom he ministers that, the moment he dies, so does all their desire to fight for their land and rights. In the words of the daughter of a settler, words with which the minister expresses his agreement just before he perishes, "They're quiet now. They'll go back to their homes. They won't fight now" (1947, 167, 161).

An equally paradoxical aspect of McCourt's novel is the fact that, at the same time that the author describes the opposition to white settlement by the First Nations and the Métis as a noble cause, his work questions the wisdom of any such resistance. As Johnny Bradford, the cowhand through whom much of the action is narrated, tells Conway, "what's the use of startin' a

rebellion. . . when the Metis and Indians are licked before they ever fire a shot? They won't go anywhere, and there'll be a lot of bloodshed, and hard feelin's for years afterwards" (1947, 42). That is, for McCourt, a rebellion ultimately can be nothing more than a romantic gesture. For, no matter how idealistic Riel and Conway may be, the fact is that they are both mentally unstable. As the author has Sumner say of her lover, "He was like Riel--he had a vision--and a twisted brain." Or as she concludes, considering the utter unfeasibility of Conway's political dream, it is salutary that he perished in the struggle, for "I saved him from the kind of disillusionment that would have been worse than death" (1947, 167-8, 74, 169).

The portrait of Riel that James McNamee paints in *My Uncle Joe* (1962) is less equivocal than the one sketched by McCourt, but still not unambiguous. Told from the perspective of a boy for whose father the Métis leader worked in the badlands of Montana, the novella traces a journey from the U.S. Great Plains to the Saskatchewan River Valley by the narrator and his uncle, a freighter and "big, soft-hearted westerner" named Joe Campbell (1962, 22). Actually, the most noteworthy aspect of both *My Uncle Joe* and the novel into which it is later expanded, *Them Damn Canadians Hanged Louis Riel!* (1971), is their unapologetic pan-Western nationalism--or, perhaps more correctly, continentalism. For McNamee, individuals are not good or bad but Western or Eastern, i.e., Ontarians (Osachoff 1985, 66). As he has Campbell comment, in "the old days" people "shared" their food and always charged "a fair price", but you "weren't dealing with Canadians then, you were dealing with westerners." Or as he describes the psychological and moral progress of a former Easterner, "Bob Swinton, who came from Ontario but you would never suspect it because he had advanced". This is no mean achievement, since Upper Canadians purportedly excel "in only three things, in singing Protestant hymns, in burning houses, and in

stealing” (1971, 71, 125, 91).

Campbell’s East-West manicheism is not devoid of internal contradictions, however. Thus, although the Montanan describes himself as “Scotch”, he, like the Métis leader, is in reality “one-eight Chipewyan”, the reason he is so sympathetic toward the man he calls “Mr. Riel” (1961, 1). Yet in order to transform his hero into a purely regional icon, he is forced to deny any other aspect of the latter’s identity, including his ethnoracial and cultural heritage. As Campbell corrects an Ontario Orangeman who has been sent to Regina by his lodge to witness the hanging, Riel is neither “a Frenchman” nor “a half-breed,” “he’s a westerner”. For, the freighter adds seemingly oblivious to the irony in his statement, “he’s as white as me” (1971, 76-7). Campbell’s Western-centrism is also complicated by the fact that the people on the Canadian side of the border do not seem to share his view of the world. With their loyalty to their quaint “Sovereign Queen”, and perhaps annoyed by Campbell’s frequent threats that if Riel is condemned to death “President Cleveland will send his bluecoats riding up here”, the Canadians have a rather distinct perspective of the Métis leader. To quote the narrator after he reaches northern Alberta, “Nearly everybody in Edmonton hated Mr. Riel. I guess they never knew him like my uncle and I did” (1971, 75, 29). More significantly, even the author himself seems to have some questions about Riel’s mental state, at least in the 1880s. As McNamee writes in a short preface to the British edition of *My Uncle Joe*, a note not included in the original version, the “Mr. Riel” mentioned in the work is the historical Louis Riel who opposed Canada in Manitoba and who, after his defeat, fled to a life of exile in the United States. However, while he remained “as eloquent as ever” in both French and English when he returned to Canada in 1884, by then “he was mentally ill” (1963, n.p.)

A similar level of ambivalence regarding Riel’s mental capacity is evident in Giles Lutz’s

*The Magnificent Failure* (1967). A U.S. historical novelist who has devoted several other works to what his book's jacket calls noble but "lost causes" in the Great Plains, Lutz is almost elegiac about "the Bois-Brulés [sic], the people of mixed blood." Instead of attempting to deny that the Métis are necessarily the product of miscegenation, or equating racial mixing with degeneration, the author openly celebrates it. As he writes, the Métis' First Nations and European ancestors transmitted to their progeny "the vigor of two races", producing "a people singularly adapted to this wild, cruel land." Indeed, the Métis were "created" to live in the North-West. Unfortunately, destiny conspired against them and "decreed another fate" (3).

The tragedy for the Métis, according to *The Magnificent Failure*, is that the one leader who can inspire them to act as a unit is mentally ill, or at least helplessly quixotic. Early in the narrative, Dumont persuades a (fictitious) young Métis hunter named Janvier Ouellette to travel with him to Montana to ask Riel to return to Canada. Ottawa continues to ignore Batoche's grievances and Dumont feels that only the hero of Red River can "lead us again", since he is such a magnetic figure that when he "says a man can do something, that man does it" (18, 78). Ouellette is skeptical about Riel's inspirational powers, a doubt that is further reinforced when he finally meets the famous exile. Rather than encountering a spellbinding orator, he faces a man who appears to be so defeated by his dire circumstances that he can barely string "two coherent words together." Later, after witnessing the warmth and confidence with which the people of Batoche welcome Riel, Ouellette does change his opinion, reasoning that such an impact on the Métis masses must be a sign of "greatness" and that the newcomer is "the man who would fashion their deliverance." However, he soon reverts to his earlier position that Riel is less a leader than someone who needs "directing to make his way" (73, 138, 76).

Ouellette's conclusion that Riel is not mentally fit to lead the Métis is precipitated by the latter's behaviour at Batoche. No sooner has the politician-mystic arrived in the community than he proceeds to alienate not only the English-speaking Métis and the white settlers but also the Catholic clergy. Ouellette, who believes that the Métis' "fight wasn't against the Church", cannot understand why Riel would clash with the priests until he realizes that his new leader lives in a fantasy world, a private world increasingly divorced from the mundane reality around him. Riel's principal objective, Ouellette deduces, is not so much to defend the welfare of the Métis as to be their supreme leader, both political and spiritual. So intent is Riel on gaining total control over the Métis, that he is even willing to sacrifice their future, since if "I cannot lead in all things, my leadership is valueless" (191-2). Surprisingly, Dumont comes to share his young compatriot's view. The master buffalo hunter, who bears no little responsibility for the ethnoracial schisms in the community, concedes that Riel's obsession with spiritual matters is bound to be catastrophic for the Métis. After all, he asks Ouellette rhetorically, "Doesn't he realize that if we lose this war there will be no church to attend, nor any men to attend it?" Yet, even though Dumont knows that Riel is "wrong," he refuses to repudiate his leader because he cannot conceive of any Métis struggle without him. In Dumont's words, "if I accuse him so, what will the people do? If I destroy their belief in him, do I destroy everything?" Or to phrase it differently, while the Métis' stand at Batoche may be a glorious moment in their history, in light of Riel's troubled leadership, it is one that can only end in defeat. To quote the judgment of a friendly white doctor, as well as the book's title, it is a "magnificent" failure (212-3, 319).

In contrast to Lutz, Jean-Jules Richard fails to discern much that is magnificent, or even positive, about the Métis leader in his novel *Louis Riel Exovide* (1972). Now largely out of favour

with both readers and critics, Richard is one of the true mavericks of Quebec letters, being often considered the first of the province's "écrivains modernes" and "le plus ancien" of its "écrivains socialistes" (Bourassa 216). He is also one of Quebec's first overt atheists, having "abjuré officiellement" his Catholicism before World War II. Richard's rationale for renouncing the faith into which he was born is that "la religion catholique m'ennuyait. Je n'étais pas heureux là-dedans" (qtd. in R. Martel 1972a, 43-4). Yet he never quite seems to manage to escape its influence, at least in a negative way. So pervasive are the author's anticlericalism and antideism that they completely shape what a critic calls his "roman historique au titre barbare" (R. Martel 1972b).

While Richard castigates religion in general, he is especially caustic toward Catholicism and its byzantine temporal workings. As depicted in his novel, the actions of the Catholic clergy at Batoche are less mystical than mystifying. For instance, Father André first writes Riel advising him to attend a meeting of the Settlers' Union in Prince Albert but then counsels him to do the very opposite. Subsequently, after the Métis leader ignores his second missive and addresses the gathering, the priest declares in church that he wishes that "les Riel soient rois ou empereurs de père en fils afin que leur équité et leur sagesse soient mises d'une façon officielle au service de la nation" (63, 71). Still later, when Riel proclaims that the "vieille romaine a fini de régner dans ces parages" and that his "église de Batoche est en train de devenir son Vatican", André and the other clergy denounce him as an apostate. Yet, once the Métis leader is condemned to death, it is the Breton missionary who is assigned by the Church to help Riel "mourir en paix." As the narrator cynically evaluates the decision, "Certes, le Prophète a failli enlever au clergé la direction spirituelle de la nation, mais depuis qu'il est en prison, les Métis reviennent au bercail et il ne faut

*pas les brusquer*” (173, 178, 249).

The author does not restrict his sarcasm to the clergy, though. He is also quite disdainful of the behaviour of the people of Batoche themselves, especially their propensity for paranormal visions. The most unusual of these apparitions are the ones experienced by Fabienne Golinot. The wife of Charles T’Enfant Colin dit Golinot, a former Manitoba politician and minister modelled on the reputed double agent Charles Nolin, Fabienne is the “plus avenante” of all Métis women (24). She was romantically involved with Tom Scott at Red River and, after he dies, begins to receive nightly visits from him. Feeling responsible for the execution of “son beau”, Fabienne deduces that Scott is haunting her house because of the ignoble manner in which Riel and the Métis killed him and then disposed of his body. However, it turns out that there is a much simpler explanation for the phenomena. The Orangeman is not tormenting Fabienne posthumously because he “erre sans sépulture” in the afterlife and wishes to seek shelter in her home “pour la saison d’hiver”. Rather, he is being impersonated by a Métis Don Juan, one of Fabienne’s spurned suitors who desires desperately to possess her (35, 88).

Richard’s Riel of course is also prone to visions, although his supposedly originate not with a “fantôme” but with “l’esprit de Dieu” (120). The Métis leader’s revelations, which seem directly connected to his frequent fasting, at first have a primarily political focus. As he describes his earliest communion with the divine, he was meditating on a hill overlooking Washington, when a “figure. . . lumineuse et impressionnante” appeared to him and announced: “Lève-toi, Louis Riel. Pars et va-t-en vers l’Ouest où tu as une mission à remplir” (128, 88). However, after he and his family relocate to Saskatchewan, he learns that the objectives of his mission are less material than spiritual, theological. Convinced that the Catholic Church has irreparably compromised itself in its

relations with the Canadian and imperial governments, becoming “une faction adverse, hostile, mécréante, [et] injuste”, Riel ascertains that God wishes him to “me séparer de cette Église qui sert deux papes à la fois, l’un à Rome, l’autre à Londres” (96, 101). He also discovers that God has bestowed upon him the title of Exovide, or “celui qui voit l’avenir et qui sauvera son peuple”, and wants him to establish a “gouvernement théocratique de l’Exovide” called the Exovidat [Exovidat, in French] an ostensibly independent council whose very first motion is to recognize “Louis Riel comme un Prophète au service de Jésus-Christ” (166, 171).

Interestingly, Riel becomes fully conscious of the import of his visions only after William Henry Jackson joins his entourage. The secretary of the Prince-Albert based Settlers’ Union, as well as a “natural egalitarian” who believes that the “*oppression of the aboriginal has been the crying sin of the white race in America*” (qtd. in D.B. Smith 1984, 7), Jackson is the first person to call the Métis leader, “maître.” Along with Bishop Bourget, he is also the individual most responsible for persuading the “Prophète” that his voices are legitimate, since “jouir de l’extase” is “la caractéristique des saints de ton Église qui n’ont pas été martyrs.” Or as he argues with the Catholic clergy, the proof that his “chef est prédestiné” is that he has been “élu non seulement par la majorité de la population, mais aussi par Dieu” (87, 110). Although the Ontario-born Jackson hails from a very pious Protestant family, both of his grandfathers being Wesleyan Methodist ministers (D. Smith 1981, 83-4), such is his attachment to “l’élu de Dieu” that he actually converts to Catholicism (115, 174). Indeed, even after Riel has the “petit Ecossais” arrested as a spy--presumably to protect him from other Métis--Jackson never loses his faith in the man who declares him “mon plus fidèle ami” (145, 217, 129).

Jackson plays another pivotal role in Riel’s life, a uniquely Richardian one, by introducing

his sister to the Prophet. History, when it does acknowledge her at all, records that Jackson had one sister named either Cicely or Cecily (Beal and Macleod 128; Siggins 347). A school teacher in Prince Albert, she is not supposed to have been directly involved in the events of 1884-85. Yet, in Richard's novel, this hitherto unknown heroine becomes so central to Riel's mission that she even overshadows her brother. Now christened Cécile, she is nothing less than the Métis leader's own Maid of Batoche, his kilted "Jeanne d'Arc!" (87, 230). Their first meeting is an inauspicious one, as Riel mistakes pepper for poison and falsely accuses the young woman of trying to kill him. However, he soon discerns that, rather than wishing him ill, Cécile is really attempting to help him realize his vision. She is not just a divine instrument but a most attractive one, a living apparition along whose inviting "hanches" he can run his hands. As he tells her, "Jeanne d'Arc! Vous êtes envoyée par l'esprit de Dieu. Quand je jeûne, l'esprit de Dieu communique avec moi. Il m'envoie des visions, mais c'est la première fois qu'il me présente un ange" (128-9).

Richard is not utterly insensitive to the fate of Riel and the Métis. Still, when he does show concern with their plight, it is usually not because of who they are, or what they have done, but because of what has been done to them. For example, he describes the Canadian forces at Batoche as a debauched "bande de vagabonds et de fiers-à-bras, de tueurs à gages". Motivated by an "esprit racial" and "anglais jusqu'à la haine," the police and volunteers are more interested in raiding the defenceless Métis women in the surrounding area, during their customary "*skin drive*", than in confronting the soldiers defending the village (179-80). He also accuses "un Canadien français, sir Georges-Etienne Cartier," of being responsible for Riel's "défaite, son bannissement, [et] ses quinze années d'errance". As he has the "fondateur du Manitoba" assert, the reason that "les Canadiens français veulent me faire passer pour un fou" is that they are "trop ignorants pour

comprendre le mysticisme et les choses scientifiques et spirituelles. Ils préfèrent le sport qui leur tient la tête vide.” The Franco-Catholic clergy, in particular, resents the fact that “j’ai osé résister à son pouvoir temporel et commercial. J’ai osé dire la vérité en faisant connaître que leur Église n’était pas si bonne que ça” (44, 227). Yet, in spite of Richard’s awareness of Riel’s dual victimization by English-speaking Canada and Quebec, he ultimately does not trust the Métis leader, especially his mysticism. The author seems almost embarrassed by his protagonist’s dependence on religion, an intellectual failing that he attributes to Riel’s fear of death and to his heterogeneous heritage, which is “indienne, française, irlandaise, scandinave et pourquoi pas ultra-terrestre?” To quote Richard, “Seul un héritier de ceux-ci peut être divin en ce bas monde. Et la religion n’est-elle pas avant tout un grand désir de retour dans les galaxies?” (213). In other words, for Richard, Riel is clearly mentally unbalanced. He is a political leader who believes that “Dieu arrangera les affaires des Métis comme des experts en compatibilité”, someone who “prend ses rêves pour des prophéties claires et nettes” (198, 164).

If anything, in *Tales from a Prairie Drifter* (1973), Rod Langley is even more unforgiving than Richard in his treatment of Riel. First staged at Regina’s Globe Theatre, Langley’s two-act play could perhaps best be described as a political farce, or even cartoon. Subtlety is definitely not its forte, as is evident when the Governor General virtually opens the work by declaring that Macdonald’s government has only one objective, “*expansion*.” To quote the regal representative:

My fellow citizens--expansion. National expansion, continental expansion. To the glory of God, Empire and the Queen. The North West Territories shall soon ring to the axe of English men. The flag of civilization and freedom shall unfold on every flagstaff north of the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel [sic]--from Atlantic to Pacific. A railroad,

already begun, shall be completed, linking the great Prairie empire--already white for the harvest--forever to other jewels in the imperial crown. O God, save the Queen--God save her. May Britannia's righteous rule illuminate with Christian light every dark corner of our great West. Destiny--God--Queen." (1-2)

Similarly, almost from the moment General Middleton enters the scene, one has little doubt as to his imperialism and snobbery. As the British commander of the Canadian forces appeals to the Prime Minister, "If these raw colonial troops are not replaced by regulars, I cannot be responsible for their actions." Or as Middleton later confides to one of his officers, "I have no confidence in these damned Sunday soldiers. If only I had British regulars" (41-2).

An Australian-born writer best known for his play about another Canadian iconoclast, Norman Bethune, Langley does not always indulge in broad caricature. For instance, in a short but brilliant sketch, which owes much to Joseph Kinsey Howard's *Strange Empire*, he is able to convey the complex personality of Lieutenant Arthur Howard. The enigmatic Connecticut Yankee voluntarily joins the Canadian forces, even though he bears no personal animosity toward the Métis. His motivation is simply technological, his need to test his beloved Gatling gun in a real war, "to kill men, not to drill spruce planks." As Howard explains to the Minister of the Interior, "I am not the least bit interested in brutality or the mass murder of your enemies--whoever they are. My mission is purely scientific. Your rebellion is merely my laboratory" (29). Langley also provides an interesting view of Macdonald. Like Frederick Walsh and other recent writers and scholars on Riel, the playwright contends that the Prime Minister deliberately provokes the North-West Rebellion for political reasons, "to finish the railroad" (15, 25-6). However, Langley introduces a new element into the discussion. For Macdonald, the transcontinental rail line that

would unite the country is not merely a mammoth construction project but “a great cathedral from Atlantic to Pacific”, a national temple for which fate itself has chosen him “high priest, chief builder.” Furthermore, since people have always had “to bleed and suffer” in order to erect great monuments, the Prime Minister is philosophical about the fact that the same situation will happen in Canada. In his words to his mistress, a giant whisky bottle, “small things of beauty must be destroyed so the greater beauty can take its place. Blood and pain--the only way. Come. Comfort me” (15, 25-5, 19).

What is most remarkable about *Tales from a Prairie Drifter*, though, is its overt contempt for Riel, a vitriolic scorn bordering on hatred. The author considers that the only genuine leader of the Métis is Dumont. Unfortunately, the polyglot but formally uneducated Prince of the Prairies feels that he is incapable of understanding “the white man” and “his language--or what goes on in his head. To me they are mad men.” Thus he readily concedes the political guidance of his people to Riel, the one-time seminarian who claims that he understands not only “the ways of the whites, the Indians, and the Métis--for I am a Métis--but even greater I understand the ways of God” (22). Unable to fathom why Dumont would defer to a lesser being like Riel, Langley proceeds to demonize the politician-mystic, mostly through ridicule. For the author, Riel is an extremely destructive if banal leader. To begin with, the self-proclaimed “David” of the New World is an arch hypocrite. As Riel describes the Exovidate that will control his theocratic New Empire of Saskatchewan, “I will not even be on this council, I won’t even have a vote. Mind you. The first thing I want the Exovidat [sic] to do is to officially vote me in as a prophet.” He also has a propensity for making fatuous theological pronouncements, such as “Hell is no longer eternal. It exists but only for a certain Duration [sic]--thanks to the mercy of God.” Or “Christ is real in my

visions--but it is pagan nonsense to think He is present in the Host” (35-6). Above all, Riel is someone who is willing to sacrifice his people for his private vision. Convinced that Providence will ultimately ensure a Métis victory, since he is “God’s annointed [sic]”, he systematically opposes Dumont’s plans to defend the community, therefore precipitating the military debacle at Batoche. Moreover, Langley suggests that there may be method to Riel’s madness. For it is only through the crushing of his people that the “cardboard prophet” is able to realize his overriding ambition in life, martyrdom (42, 45).

The focus on Riel as a religious mystic continues in Claude Dorge’s *Le roitelet* (1976), but in a considerably more positive vein. First produced by Saint Boniface’s renowned Cercle Molière, the oldest French-language theatre in Western Canada, Dorge’s two-act play is arguably the most original work inspired by the Métis leader. Although heavily influenced by Riel’s own writings, *Le roitelet* is less a historical play than an expressionist one (Chris Johnson 200). The action is set at the Longue-Pointe Asylum, yet it takes place entirely in the head of the central character. With the exception of Riel, the unidentified nun who runs the mental hospital, and the psychiatrist Henry Howard, all the characters are not real figures but rather projections in the protagonist’s mind.

While the Riel of *Le roitelet* is very much an interior Riel, he is one troubled by all sorts of demons, not the least of which is his incestuous relationship with his sister Sara. As portrayed by Dorgé, the two siblings are not only unnaturally close to each other but even express the hope to one day “s’épouser” (47, 35). Sara, however, frustrates their conjugal plans when she resolves to sublimate her carnal desires for her brother in order to dedicate herself completely to God and become a nun. In her words, “Dieu mérite tout notre amour. Oui, mon frère, aimons-le. Servons-

le. Ah! Louis, l'éternité nous dédommagera de nos sacrifices, de nos travaux. Le ciel! C'est Dieu! C'est l'engloutissement de notre néant, dans Dieu!" Riel attempts to change Sara's mind and persuade her to become "homme et femme", but his sister is firm if diplomatic. She politely reminds him that she has given "mon coeur, mon corps et mon âme" not to any mere mortal but to God, the divine force that the historical Sara calls "mon Divin Epoux, fidèle et puissant entre tous les Epoux" (63, 78; S. Riel 169).

Riel is also deeply affected by the relationships with the other women in his life, notably his overly protective mother, who expects him to return from his Montreal studies "en soutane", and Marie-Julie Guernon, the young Quebecker whose father categorically rejects him as a prospective son-in-law since he does not wish that "ma fille épouse un sang-mêlé. Un Métis" (32, 42). Yet at the heart of *Le roitelet* is not the bond between Riel and any woman but between him and another man, Tom Scott. Dorge's Scott remains an Orangeman, but he is not one consumed by hatred of all things Catholic and French. On the contrary, he is Riel's closest supporter and ally, the steadfast friend who shelters the Métis leader from his "idées noires" and who convinces him that "tu seras le soldat du Seigneur et son roi, car ton combat est juste" (24, 26). Scott is actually a combination of John the Baptist and Judas to Riel, the faithful disciple who both announces and sacrifices himself for his master by betraying him. As the Ontarian describes their bond, "Je suis ton précurseur. Le nouveau Baptiste. Et toi, tu es le nouveau Christ. Tu es le nouveau Christ!" Although Scott's foremost role in life is to enable Riel to become leader of the Métis people, he still opposes Riel politically, since it is by provoking Riel's execution that he makes possible the latter's death and triumphant martyrdom. In Scott's words to the man who calls him "ma force, mon réconfort, mon ami", "Je dois mourir pour que tu meures" (85, 64, 116).

Needless to say, Dorge's characterization of the Riel-Scott relationship is ahistorical. As we saw in Chapter I, there is no evidence that Riel was ever much distressed by the execution of the Orangeman, to say nothing of Scott perceiving himself as Riel's political-spiritual forerunner. Of course the fact that a literary work is not true to the historical record does not necessarily mean that it fails as literature. Still, Dorge's unusual treatment of the relationship between the two adversaries is problematic since it reflects his tendency to transform negative situations into positive ones, a tendency that at times makes his play surprisingly undramatic. For instance, Doctor Henry Howard relates how when he first met Riel at Longue-Pointe and addressed him as "Mr. David", the surname under which the latter had been institutionalized, Riel promptly corrected him. To prove his real identity, the Métis leader then took out "a small prayer-book, and opening it at the fly-leaf, handed it to me, saying, 'Look at my name there, Louis D. Riel, written by my dear sister.'" But no sooner had Riel shown the missal to the psychiatrist than "the Sister that was present snatched the book from our hands and tore out the fly-leaf, which she tore into pieces, saying 'You are only known here, sir, as Mr. David.'" Howard adds that Riel was so incensed by the nun's action that "I believe if the guardians and I were not there, and she had not cleared out of the room, he would have torn her in pieces. For a few moments I certainly never saw a man more angry" (645). In contrast, in *Le roitelet*, when the nun tells Riel that the best way to ensure he has an enjoyable stay at the hospital is to respect its "règlements", he responds meekly: "Pardonnez-moi, ma soeur, je ne voulais pas faire le rebelle, mais mon nom. . .". When she then tears out the page, saying imperiously: "Ici, monsieur, votre nom est David", he does not react at all (21). That is, in an apparent attempt to portray Riel as a Christ-like martyr, Dorge turns him into an uncharacteristically passive figure, not someone who makes things happen but

someone to whom things happen.

This trend to accentuate Riel's positive qualities reaches its apogee in the work of Rudy Wiebe. A native of northern Saskatchewan, Wiebe has been fascinated by the Métis leader for most of his writing career. While the author does not include Riel as a character in his award-winning novel *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973), he does have Dumont describing his compatriot as the only possible pan-First Nations leader in the North-West, since he is the "one Person [sic] who talks white" (108). In "Riel: A Possible Film Treatment" (1975), a sketch for an aborted CBC documentary, Wiebe outlines his plans for a fictionalized life of the Métis leader. The author particularly stresses Riel's "veneration" of both the sacred and the secular word, his desire to give his people "a permanent voice" through "the *written* word which speaks though the speaker be dead" (159). In the short story "Games for Queen Victoria" (1976), Wiebe probes a historical encounter between Riel and William F. Butler to convey the insidiousness of European cultural chauvinism, a chauvinism so pervasive that it prevents even someone like the celebrated British adventurer and travel writer from accepting that the "New World Genghis Khan" is not a bloodthirsty despot but a soft-spoken pacifist. To quote Wiebe's Butler, "A leather-clad Indian on the prairie grass has presence, has dignity, but to suppose that this half-caste could ever play the part of the greatest man on earth since Alexander, dressed in the garb of a priest and the footwear of a savage, was simply absurd. Absurd" (59-60).

It is in *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977), however, that Wiebe most thoroughly explores the many permutations of the Riel story. Narrated predominantly by Pierre Falcon, like Roux's *Bois-Brûlés*, the novel portrays the Métis leader as both a spiritual and a political figure, a religious visionary as well as his people's "singer-king" (1977, 129). Early in his student days in

distant Montreal, Riel becomes aware that he has entered a foreign world that not only “would never be his” but would not even acknowledge his collective reality. As Falcon has the adult protagonist recollect his impressions when he first went East, the Métis were “mere pemmican-eaters, not a word about them necessary anywhere in the libraries of the world, while their words crowded upwards in him until he felt his head would burst!” The narrator actually states, without developing the idea, that Riel’s initial Quebec sojourn inculcates in him a “life-long sense of inadequacy in the face of white custom,” an inferiority complex that ultimately results in his agreeing to be defended by the Eastern lawyers at Regina, since “the mysteries of a treason trial were suddenly all overwhelming white mysteries to him” (1977, 80, 322). Yet, it is also as a consequence of his Quebec experience that Riel realizes that, if he wishes his people’s reality to be inscribed in the consciousness of the outside world, he “*must* write their words down, the persistent sound of their words rising, vanishing with the grass, the fading buffalo,” for, “who would hear them if he did not speak, did not write, write?” That is, Riel’s first Eastern journey impels him to sacrifice himself for his nation. The young Métis decides to become a writer, not to express his private fears and aspirations, but to articulate his collectivity’s will, “to give my people a voice” (1977, 80, 159).

Above all, Wiebe’s Riel is a mystic, a “giant” who, if “God had willed it. . . , could have ruled the world” (1977, 36). Juxtaposed throughout the novel to the more primitive and war-like Dumont, who incongruously plays a pivotal role both at Batoche and at Red River, the politician-mystic is a socially-conscious prophet bent on transforming the North-West into an earthly paradise. As he tells his second military commander, “If I can think of a heaven to come where the good God allows no death, then I can think of such a heaven having been once, too. . . perhaps it

is right now, but we aren't in it." Or as Falcon describes the Métis leader's mission, Riel's vision is nothing less than to "build a Christian nation" in the Saskatchewan Valley, to create "God's perfect [earthly] kingdom" (1977, 52, 138, 245). For Riel, as for Falcon, the evidence that the protagonist is his people's political and spiritual saviour is that God has granted him special prophetic powers. He is "the Lord's chosen" and, as such, is led to discern that private revelation enables the individual believer to attain a deeper "comprehension of God" than the clergy, whose perception is "bound by the Church, by the necessity of formula" (1977, 329). More specifically, Riel learns that God has entrusted him with "a mission to complete for which all mankind will call you blessed." This is a rather political crusade that appears to consist chiefly of taking a "heavy hammer in your right hand and hurl[ing] it against Ottawa" and convincing the Métis that if they hope to liberate themselves intellectually, they must "change their thinking not only about politics but also about their religious faith" (1977, 139, 164, 284).

Not surprisingly, neither the Catholic Church nor the Canadian government embraces the notion that Riel is divinely inspired, much less that he is "the most saintly man in the North-West" (1977, 331). Whether clerical or lay, Catholics reject the transcendence of unmediated revelation, since "only the Pope can declare divine truth." The Church's hierarchy, in particular, resents the fact that Riel declares that "Rome ha[s] fallen" and vows to transfer the Holy See to Saint Boniface (1977, 166, 326). The central Canadian-dominated political establishment, too, is openly antagonistic toward the Métis leader. "Eastern" politicians like Macdonald and Cartier, "Canada's greatest statesmen and her greatest rogues", especially fear that his plans to divide the North-West among "the landless believers of the world" are bound to jeopardize their dream of a transcontinental country (1977, 88, 325). Thus, feeling threatened by the "prodigy who had so

unbelievably created Manitoba,” the priests and politicians together declare war on Riel under the false pretext that he is mentally unbalanced. Still, even though they eventually succeed in killing their antagonist, they are unable to vanquish his spirit, since Riel’s “body on the end of that rope would prove forever how Canada destroyed us” (1977, 125, 351).

As one can sense from the above description, *The Scorched-Wood People* is not exactly a “neutral text” (Duffy 210; van Toorn 140). Yet it is contentious in ways that the author does not seem to have anticipated, for it situates him in a tradition that he often disparages. Wiebe has charged Edmund Collins with beginning a Canadian school of writing that obliterates “any distinction between historical fact and hackneyed invention”, a regrettable development that supposedly has resulted in the eulogization of certain figures and the demonization of others based solely on their political orientation or geographic origin. At the same time, while he idolizes the very individuals that Collins vilifies, and vice versa, Wiebe does not seem any more respectful of what he terms “cold--or warmed over--facts” than does the Newfoundlander (1978, 239, 226). For example, in order to portray Riel as a Canadian patriot, the author conveniently fails to draw attention to his protagonist’s considerable pro-U.S. sympathies. Quite the contrary, he has the Métis leader praying to God to spare his people “the misfortune of having to join the United States! . . . May the United States help us, according to the disposition of your Providence, but never through union, never through our agreement” (1977, 276-7; Riel III, 187, 307). To justify Riel’s sanctioning of the execution of Scott, Wiebe also depicts the Orangeman not just as a contemptible imperialist and “blasphemer” but as the murderer of a mentally retarded young Métis (1977, 326, 47). Finally, again like the author of *The Story of Louis Riel* and *Annette, the Metis Spy*, Wiebe too is not above using the mystique of historical fiction to invest his novel with

truthfulness. In fact, he even attempts to naturalize his narrative by relating it through a historical Métis figure.

The most typical criticism of Wiebe's choice of Falcon as narrator is the latter's temporal implausibility. Since the Métis bard died in 1876, almost a decade before the events at Batoche, "the idea of his continuing as a spectral narrator strains one's credence to the wrenching point" (Woodcock 1978, 99; Duffy 205). Falcon himself seems aware of his chronological displacement. One moment he is very much grounded in space and time, a revered minstrel who christens his people "Bois-brûlés" and whom even someone like Riel addresses as "Grandfather". The next, though, he is a ghostly Methuselah who, while describing Jackson's baptism as "a son of the New Nation", casually notes that "[s]ixty-seven years later Jaxon would die a pauper on the sidewalk in front of the New York hotel that had expelled him" (1977, 25, 35, 225). Perhaps even more problematic than Falcon's lack of verisimilitude, however, is his inconsistency. Wiebe's narrator often seems confused, uncertain whether "he is omniscient or intimately involved" (Lecker 132), an intellectual turmoil that likely arises from his being not so much an independent character as an authorial device for reading Riel.

Wiebe opens the first edition of *The Scorched-Wood People* with a most extraordinary epigraph:

And who has made this song?  
 Who else but good Pierre Falcon.  
 He made the song, and it was sung  
 To mark the victory we had won;  
 He made this song that very day,

So sing the glory of the Bois-brûlés. (1977, n.p.)

In a subsequent interview, Wiebe explains that “one reason for having Pierre Falcon narrate is that it [sic] is the voice of the people” (qtd. in Struthers 26). That is, *The Scorched-Wood People* is not just written by the most famous of Métis bards but by the Métis people. Yet, since the poem is excised from the more widely-circulated paperback edition of the novel, one is led to deduce that the author--or perhaps, rather, the transcriber--does not trust his own reading of Riel. Considering this nineteenth-century collective Franco-Catholic Métis voice’s uncanny proclivity to sound like a late-twentieth-century white Western Canadian Protestant, one also cannot help but suspect that the narrator is really a thinly disguised spokesperson for Wiebe.

The extent to which Wiebe manipulates Falcon to serve the author’s “own rhetorical and polemical purposes” (van Toorn 143) is particularly evident in his depiction of Riel as a Western protest leader and as a crusading Anabaptist. For Wiebe’s narrator, the two North-West conflicts are not manifestations of the archetypal American clash over territory between Natives and Newcomers, a reflection of the fact that settler societies in the New World are necessarily built on what Bruce Cockburn calls “stolen land” (n.p.). Rather, they are basically a regional confrontation between a pioneering multicultural West and a pseudo-civilized East of land speculators. Of course, since there is little evidence that the benign West is any more tolerant of Riel’s Catholicism and Frenchness than the predatory East, Wiebe is forced to have his narrator downplay those aspects of his protagonist’s life. Thus, instead of being rather self-conscious about his religious and linguistic heritage, as befits someone who fights passionately “for the extension of French-language and Roman Catholic rights to Western Canada”, the Riel imagined by Wiebe’s Falcon embraces the contemporary Prairie view that his struggle is “a western revolt

against unfair living conditions” imposed on the region by an uncaring Ottawa (Rocan 94, 122).

But then Falcon’s pan-Westernism has so estranged him from the homeland of his paternal ancestors that he actually conflates Franco-Catholic Quebec and Anglo-Protestant Ontario as the Métis people’s implacable “Eastern” enemy. As he toasts the raising of the Métis flag at Red River, it will “cinch the North-West tight against Ontario and Quebec, forever. What piddling difference does it make--strangers all laughing and fixed upon our potential” (1977, 44).

No less unlikely than Falcon’s pan-Westernism is his attitude toward Catholicism. While describing the narrator as “a pious man,” who loves “to contemplate the divine mystery of the mass which I attend every day,” Wiebe suggests that Falcon shares the author’s opinion that the Catholic Church does not support Riel mainly because, in contrast to Protestantism, it has degenerated into a formulaic faith incapable of helping its adherents to experience “the infinity of God” (1977, 39, 329). A devout Mennonite, Wiebe has claimed that there are many affinities between Riel’s religious views and Anabaptist theology, which is “totally anti-Catholic.” To quote him, the Métis leader “hits the Catholic Church on exactly the same point that the Anabaptists did: that is, the Church putting form and structure over and above justice to the poor--the kind of human justice that everyone should expect” (qtd. in Bergman 167). However, if Anabaptism is in essence individualistic, if it insists “that each individual must decide the Bible message for himself”, then Riel makes an extremely problematic Anabaptist. For in religion, as in politics, the Métis leader brooks no dissension. Instead of granting the “greatest degree of liberty” to “the individual conscience in spiritual matters”, he is the only person who can interpret doctrine, branding as traitor anyone who disagrees with him (C. Smith 21, Wiebe 1977, 227). In other words, Riel does not reject mainstream Catholicism in favour of some text-centred faith like that

of the Anabaptists, whose devotion to the individual reading of the Scriptures led to their being called “*Biblicists*” (C. Smith 21). Rather, he parts with Rome in order to embrace an even more autocratic Catholicism, a highly personal religion in which he is the Pope, the Church, and perhaps even Christ (Riel II, 73; III, 374).

What renders Wiebe’s characterization of Riel as an Anabaptist especially paradoxical is the fact that it derives its authenticity from a most unexpected source, Bishop Bourget. For the author, as for the historical Riel, the proof that the Métis leader’s revelations are genuine is to be found in the 1875 letter in which the ultramontane cleric informs his protégé that God “has given you a mission which you must fulfil in every respect” (Wiebe 1977, 138-9; Bourget 437). Or as Wiebe has Riel state, the fateful letter, which “has strengthened me in my sad hour”, demonstrates that the “Spirit of God fell upon the sainted Bourget of Montreal, blessed be his name, who knew us and knew our prayers, and who told me my grand commission for our people of the North-West” (1977, 157, 223). Wiebe’s reliance on Bourget’s letter for the validation of Riel’s mysticism is curious for a series of reasons. First, the letter itself does not seem to support that conclusion, as Bourget himself stressed (qtd. in Riel III, 320). Second, it is debatable whether even a high-ranking member of the Church Militant could ever adequately prove the veracity of a divine revelation. Third, and most significant, Wiebe’s conclusion runs counter to the whole tenor of the novel. After repeatedly asserting that individuals do not need the Catholic Church as a mediator between themselves and God, the author turns to an ultra-orthodox bishop like Bourget to prove the truthfulness of unmediated divine revelation. That is, he appeals to the authority of the (discredited) Church to demonstrate that it has no authority.

A radically different portrait of Riel emerges in George Woodcock’s *Six Dry Cakes for the*

*Hunted* (1977). In many ways, Woodcock's play is a direct response to *The Scorched-Wood People*. The West Coast author and Dumont biographer, known for chastising Canadians for their preference of the frenzied martyr over the heroic man of action, has been quite critical of Wiebe's depiction of the Prince of the Prairies as a crude and violent figure, "a bloody hunter, killer" (1975, 10; Wiebe 1977, 337). Thus, in his play, he deliberately attempts to redress this perceived imbalance by focusing primarily on Dumont. While Riel is still given a prominent position, the action does not revolve around him but around his military commander, the fearless warrior that Woodcock feels has been reduced by Canadian writers to playing "Sancho Panza to the Canadian Don Quixote" (1975, 8).

*Six Dry Cakes*, which comprises sixteen relatively brief scenes, unfolds in flashback. Only two weeks after the fall of Batoche, along with Michel Dumas, Dumont is captured at the U.S. border as he tries to flee south. There Riel's lieutenant relates to the post's commander why he is on "the safe side of the border" while his leader awaits trial in Regina and why "the rebellion of the Métis against the Canadian government has gone the way of all lost causes" (1977, 63, 61, 59). One of Dumont's explanations is that, unlike at Red River, the Catholic priests openly opposed the Métis struggle, first refusing the fighters "the sacrament" and then tempting them "with whispers of surrender" (1977, 91-3, 105). More significantly, he stresses, Riel continuously undermines his commander's military strategy. Since the politician-mystic is convinced that theirs is "God's fight" and that their ultimate victory is assured, he refuses to grant Dumont permission to ambush the advancing Canadian forces until "God has. . . given the sign." Needless to say, the divine sign never materializes and the Métis debacle becomes not only inevitable but, for Riel, desirable. Like other recent writers, Woodcock suggests that the Métis leader is not disappointed

with his people's defeat, since his main objective is less to defeat the Canadians than it is to publicize his cause. As the author has Riel explain to Dumont why he will not flee with him to the United States, "If they want to hang me, they have to try me. That is the law of the English. And they have to try me in public. I shall make the court my platform. I shall expose our sorrows to the final sigh, and so I shall fulfill my mission" (1977, 84, 103, 107).

While still not the central figure, Riel is presented in a considerably more positive light in Ken Mitchell's *Davin: The Politician* (1978). As its title suggests, the Saskatchewan author's two-act play focuses primarily on the life of Nicholas Flood Davin, both his professional career and his romantic relationship with the suffragist and writer Kate Simpson Hayes. An Irish-born journalist and politician, Davin was the founder of the *Regina Leader*, the first newspaper in what is now southern Saskatchewan. In his capacity as a reporter, he is believed to have disguised himself as a priest in order to interview Riel at the Regina prison and convey the latter's "last message to the world" (Davin 1885b, 52). Like his historical model, who wrote a poem lauding the volunteers who raised their "patriot's sword" to bring peace to "where first Riel kindled strife" (Davin 1885a), Mitchell's Davin is not completely enamoured of the Métis leader. As he rationalizes his refusal to help the politician-mystic to escape from jail, "You preached armed rebellion. The penalty is death. It's harsh, but it's the law--and without law, there can be no civilization." Yet Davin does not camouflage his obvious respect for the politico-religious prophet who dreams of creating a new nation on the Prairies, a nation in which "Indians and whites will meet and become one. . . . A new breed of men. Plainsmen" (Mitchell 1978, 35, 39). Indeed, he feels that Riel deserves the "admiration" and "sympathy" of all Westerners, not only because he has shown that "no one can suppress true Western interest without a fight" but also because of his

intellectual acuity. In Davin's words to his paramour Hayes--who, under the pseudonym Mary Markwell, had also bemoaned the day when "o'er this lovely prairie land there fell/ The blight of a proud's heart unrest, Riel!" (42)--the Métis leader "died with calm courage. He was a triumph of rationality over the mob of brutes who shouted so lewdly over his death--or the atheists who thought it a further sign of insanity that he gave himself to prayer in his last moment" (1978, 36, 94, 41).

Interestingly, Mitchell's view of Riel's mental state undergoes a metamorphosis in *The Plainsman* (1985). Like *Six Dry Cakes*, Mitchell's full-length play examines the North-West Rebellion largely from Dumont's perspective. The whole cast consists of the Adjutant-General, his wife Madeleine, Dumas, and Nolin. Although there are continuous references to Riel, he himself does not appear as a character, for reasons that soon become apparent. Early in the action, after she learns that the Métis are considering inviting the hero of Red River to return from Montana, Madeleine informs Dumont that she has just had a dream or prophecy in which "Riel appeared to me." As she explains to her husband, she was down by the river when a pelican told her to "listen to this dream. A false messiah will talk to you. And there is a Judas--who will be unknown till the final hour. Then Riel appeared, coming up the river on a York Boat [sic]--borne on a tide of blood" (1985, 9). Of course, Riel and Nolin are respectively the "false messiah" and the "Judas", the cursed pair whose thoughts and actions will have disastrous consequences for the Métis nation as a whole and for the Dumonts in particular.

Madeleine is not merely a mouthpiece for her husband. For instance, she intimates that the decision by the Red River Métis not to seek the assistance of their more nomadic Saskatchewan compatriots in 1869-70 was motivated by class, saying that "Gabriel had five hundred horsemen!

He could've saved your precious government. But we weren't civilized enough for the citizens of Fort Garry!" She also disagrees with Dumont's conclusion that if only he had not deferred to Riel in 1885, "We could've cut [the Canadian forces] down like cattle on the plains. But we waited for them to reach Batoche and shell our families! We should've smashed Middleton's troops before he left Qu'Appelle!" To quote her, any Métis victory over the Canadians would only postpone the inevitable, for the "battle was lost before it began" (1985, 22, 39-40). Yet there is no mistaking whom Madeleine considers to be the one leader who has the power to inspire the Métis people. It is certainly not the pragmatic Nolin, the turncoat that she attempts to kill in order to prevent the Saskatchewan Valley from "drown[ing] in Metis blood." It is also not Riel, the self-styled "Prince of Manitoba" whose empty rhetoric earns him nothing but a "shack in Montana--rotting in exile"; the would-be national leader who "wanted to play Christ, but. . . couldn't be a peacemaker. Only the martyr" (1985, 24, 40). Rather, it is Dumont, the fearless warrior for whom his gun is his "Holy Book!" As Madeleine tells her husband, articulating what seems to be the play's central message, "You are the hope, Gabriel. You who can keep the spirit alive. You'll be the model for the future. For those grandchildren. It will be your courage they talk about. Not my visions. Or Louis Riel's. It will be you they look to, Gabriel. People need live heroes. Not dead martyrs" (1985, 14, 40).

In *Beyond Batoche* (1985), Rex Deverell provides a more sympathetic but not ambivalent portrait of Riel. An Ontario-born and raised Baptist minister, who spent several years as the playwright-in-residence at Regina's Globe Theatre, Deverell has acquired a reputation as a creator of documentary drama, what he calls plays "based on documented evidence" (qtd. in Wallace 137). He has written on a tremendous variety of social issues, from Medicare, to labour strife,

poverty, religion, and football. Curiously, *Beyond Batoche* is not so much an examination of Riel's life as it is an exploration of the multifarious ways in which Canadians have come to terms with the Métis leader. As the playwright stated while writing the two-act play, "I'm finding that the real drama for the stage will be how a person like me deals with the material" (qtd. in Burrs 1985, 49).

*Beyond Batoche* is a play-within-a-play, or rather a screenplay-within-a-play. Beginning in an author's study, it dramatizes the personality and political conflicts among a writer, an actor, and a producer as they collectively attempt to concoct a film about Riel. For the writer, the Métis leader is essentially a mystic, someone who calls "down the wrath of God against his enemies." The actor, on the other hand, perceives him as a revolutionary, "the first Canadian Socialist political leader." Finally, the producer is not overly concerned with what Riel is as long as he can interest some television network in the concept. As he explains to his partners, "I'm going to sell Riel and somebody's going to buy him. . . but first you gotta give me ten minutes of what they must want to see" (78-9). Since the matter of what sort of Riel people wish to see is not a simple one, the inevitable complications ensue. Once the actor becomes more familiar with Métis history, he starts to suggest that "I should play Dumont" instead. After all, the buffalo hunter is not just a brilliant military strategist but he is also "straightforward", and "I'd make a better guerilla [sic] fighter than a politician" (106, 108). The producer, who obviously is not acquainted with the work of Gutteridge, Wiebe, or Rosenstock and Adair, ponders what sorts of "adjustments" the "three piece suits in Ontari-ario" will demand, since "[y]ou can't criticize John A. Macdonald" (90, 98-9). Most unexpectedly, the writer begins to entertain serious doubts about the peaceable nature of his subject. He remains convinced that Riel is a "mystic who wanted to better the lot of

his people”, a religious visionary who “dreamed the voice of God and acted on it.” Yet he finds it increasingly difficult to reconcile that “such a good man could become involved in so much bloodshed.” In the words of another character, the writer becomes so disenchanted with the Métis leader’s seemingly insane behaviour that he ultimately discovers that “he always saw himself as Louis Riel, but when the chips were down he found out he was John A. Macdonald” (94-5, 134).

Another pivotal lesson that the writer learns while writing the screenplay is that the story’s structural confusion may well be connected to the ethnoracial homogeneity of its creators. To quote him, “We were really arrogant S.O.B.s thinking we could do a program about Riel without working hand in hand with the Métis people” (127). Largely through the influence of his wife and research assistant, the writer comes to the conclusion that the project is not viable without a “native consultant”. They have been working in a vacuum, he says, and need “a kind of partner from the Métis community” to show that “the Métis people weren’t obliterated at Batoche. . . that there’s an ongoing reality here” (102-3). Thus to that end, the writer and his associates hire a “real” Métis to help them get “the flavor, the texture of Métis life.” Ironically, this “authority” on Riel and his people does not seem very knowledgeable about or interested in Christianity. She also does not understand Riel’s native language, failing to identify one of his poems when it is recited to her (103, 118-9).

The question of voice appropriation, or even appropriateness, is not so central to Michael Hollingsworth’s *Confederation and Riel* (1988). First staged at the Calgary Olympic Arts Festival, the two-act play is part of the author’s multi-volume dramatic history of Canada, *The History of the Village of Small Huts*. With the other works in the series, *Confederation and Riel* comprises what Hollingsworth calls a “Canadian nationalist project” but clearly a most irreverent

one. His scenes are very short and vertiginously fast-paced, more like a film or television show than a stage play. As the playwright explains his strategy, “You have to keep the wheels of history rolling. Never let it sit. Never give the audience time to assess what they’re watching. Being raised in a 60-miles-an-hour culture, I go for 60 scenes an hour” (qtd. in Bettis 41, 38). Despite his claim that his main wish is that “the place would learn to have a sense of itself”, Hollingsworth privileges dramatic intensity over the raising of national consciousness and invariably depicts Canadian history and historical figures through a heady mixture of burlesque and satire. After all, “History ought to be an interesting story” (qtd. in Bettis 40-1, 38).

*Confederation and Riel* has been described as a combination of “Victorian melodrama” and “Gilbert and Sullivan operetta” (M. White 52), but it could also be characterized as a universal debunking project. Hollingsworth certainly does not seem to have much sympathy for any political figure, regardless of party affiliation. For instance, his Riel is a mentally undeveloped soul who never seems to be able to overcome the effects of his pious upbringing. Almost from the moment he is born, his mother starts pleading with him to make her “heart sing. Become a religious.” Bishop Taché too reminds the young man that he is “the future” of his people, that he has been chosen to study in Montreal and, when he returns, “you will be Louis Riel, Métis priest. The first. The Church’s dream come true” (169). Perhaps inevitably, considering his awareness of “the great expectations” that his community has for him, Riel begins to believe that he is destined to accomplish great deeds, since “I am a man of some importance.” Unfortunately for the Métis leader, his political and religious utterances tend to suggest that he is not divinely inspired but “seriously disturbed.” As Riel asserts his claim to Fort Garry, “The fort is ours. The flag is proof that we are a nation.” Or as he attempts to convince Evelina Barnabé that he is the new David, “I

hear voices”; “I am a prophet”; “I have a mission”; “Gaganagagaga” (167, 187, 197).

Hollingsworth is no less scathing in his portrayal of Riel’s adversaries, however, especially the tragicomic Macdonald. For the author, the country’s founding Prime Minister is less the architect of Confederation than the ultimate Canadian colonial. Macdonald’s greatest ambition is not to be the leader of an independent country but of “a self-governing colony within the British Empire”, a bondage conspicuously evident in the pride with which he receives the title of “Knight Commander of the Bath” (179). The “corruptionist himself”, as a rival politician calls him, Macdonald is more than willing to “buy. . . off” both friend and foe in order to expand Canada’s territorial base. He is not even averse to sacrificing anyone who opposes his dream of a transcontinental country, such as Riel, asserting that some individuals “should be destroyed for the good of others” (180-1, 212). Yet he does so for essentially colonial reasons. As Hollingsworth has Macdonald close the play, with what is arguably the Prime Minister’s most celebrated saying, “A British subject I was born, a British subject I will die” (213; Macdonald 1891, 777).

In her collection of poems *Batoche* (1989), Kim Morrissey is not nearly as cynical as Hollingsworth. As the Saskatchewan poet writes, “crazy louie” is “looking saner and saner every day” (1989, 68). Still, she seems ambivalent about the value of any posthumous victory by the Métis leader:

our own Che Guevera [sic]  
resurrected by the Liberal Trudeau

:pas fou

: not guilty

:not dead  
 and yet still  
 somewhere between  
 the blue bridge named for Dumont  
 the statues the slick-postered plays  
 the framed thread from the rope of the noose  
 hangs Riel. (1989, 69)

That is, in a sense, the cultural rehabilitation of Riel is inconsequential, for it fails to alter his tragic fate.

Morrissey's suggestion that Riel's vindication is generally accepted is not quite true, as Alfred Silver's *Lord of the Plains* (1990) attests. While it could be argued that Hollingsworth is rather democratic in the way he showers his sarcasm on virtually every political figure who crosses his path, the Saskatchewan-born novelist and playwright saves his vitriol almost exclusively for Riel. The middle volume of his 1400-page Red River Trilogy, Silver's historical fiction is really a paean to Gabriel and Madeleine Dumont. Riel occupies a marginal place in the narrative but, when he does surface, it is invariably to be savaged by the "Lord of the Plains" and his wife. The literate Madeleine, or Madelaine as the author spells her name, is especially vicious toward her husband's one-time spiritual and political leader. Having read Riel's writings, she is incapable of grasping why Dumont is so submissive to a leader who is not only impractical but also mentally unbalanced. As she confronts him, "Goddammit, Gabriel, I am trying to tell you that the man you're allowing to tell you what to do is insane!" Her only explanation for her husband's subservience to a deranged mystic who entertains visions about "celestial milk" is that "Riel had

him hypnotized,” a conclusion that the buffalo hunter eventually comes to accept. In Dumont’s words, “It was a sad mistake from the beginning. My mistake more’n anybody else’s; Riel never wanted to fight. I can’t but feel bad for those that couldn’t escape like I did” (227, 345, 393).

Silver, whose unproduced and unpublished play *The Dancing Bear* has been described by a prominent drama critic as “one of the best, most complex, and fascinating plays about Riel, and about our attempts to mythologize and give meaning to the events of the Northwest Rebellion” (Chris Johnson 204), clearly shares the Dumonts’ antagonism toward the politician-mystic. As the author writes in an essay-length epilogue to *Lord of the Plains*, which echoes Madelaine’s feelings about her husband being overshadowed by the Exovede, “I’ve never been able to understand the prevailing Canadian fascination with Riel--other than the fact that the people with a vested interest in the official version also happen to be the people teaching Canadian history”(419). Silver, in fact, so disapproves of the former seminarian that he joins forces with Madelaine to administer what is unquestionably the most pernicious attack on Riel, the accusation that the Métis defeat at Batoche is the result of his deliberate strategy, that it is not so much a tragedy as a crime. To quote his narrator’s interpretation of Madelaine’s state of mind near the end of the novel, “She was definitely past caring about Louis Riel. After all the blood had soaked into the ground and all the smoke and ashes had blown away on the wind, the only person who’d got what he wanted was Louis David Riel. ‘You don’t get to be a saint without getting martyred’” (399).

Judging by the highly disparate responses of writers over the years, the matter of Riel’s mental state remains a polemical one. For some, notably Silver, Hollingsworth, Langley, and turn-of-the-century Quebec authors, the Métis leader is unquestionably deranged. Others, such as Mercier and Watt, Anderson, Wiebe, and Morrissey, are no less adamant that not only is “Riel not

mad” (Morrissey 1989, 48) but that the question itself is poorly framed, agreeing with Emily Dickinson that:

Much Madness is divinest Sense--  
 To a discerning Eye--  
 Much Sense--the starkest Madness--  
 ‘Tis the Majority  
 In this, as All, prevail--  
 Assent--and you are sane--  
 Demur--you’re straightway dangerous--  
 And handled with a Chain— (1862/1890, 209).

Or, to quote Wiebe’s Falcon, reiterating Doctor Jukes’s testimony at Regina, “we are too likely to call men whose understanding of life goes counter to our usual opinion, insane. Sanity becomes then a mere matter of majority opinion, not a test of the wisdom of what is spoken” (1977, 330).

Nevertheless, without denying the possible existence of a political element in any definition of insanity, it seems disingenuous to suggest that Riel has been perceived as insane merely because the “majority” has arbitrarily decided so, that there is no connection between his reputation and his behaviour. Even Woodcock’s otherwise incisive comparison of the Métis leader to Blake is ultimately inadequate, for the two men’s circumstances are not analogous. After all, ideas that may be perfectly legitimate as a private aesthetic fantasy or vision, may not be so if someone intends to use them as a blueprint for collective action, potentially imperilling a whole people. Or, to phrase it differently, Riel was not just a writer. He was also a political and spiritual leader and, as such, must be judged. Granted, the lucidity he exhibited both at the Regina trial and

in his later writings makes it extremely difficult to dismiss him as a madman. Yet those very same writings also reveal another dimension of his personality. To begin with, he not only initiated an armed conflict he knew he could not win but even prevented his military commander from preparing the community for the coming onslaught. Later, while in prison, instead of preparing his defence, he concerned himself with renaming geographical sites, the days of the week, and the signs of the Zodiac. Indeed, while agreeing that Riel was not insane, one cannot help but conclude that he was not quite rational either.

## Conclusion

### Riel: Canadian Patriot in Spite of Himself

Riel, je te ressuscite d'entre les morts, même  
si je ne suis pas dieu [sic], car j'ai besoin de  
toi. Paul Savoie (1984)

As one reflects on the aesthetic representations of Riel in Canadian culture since the mid-1800s, one cannot help but be struck by two interconnected yet distinct facts: the sheer volume of those representations and their enormous disparity. In spite of the publication of all known writings by the Métis leader, which one might think would have grounded him in some sort of historical reality, he continues to be portrayed in rather conflicting ways. To mention only the most prominent roles attributed to him, Riel is simultaneously a sage and a madman; a Catholic mystic and an Anabaptist visionary; a First Nations leader and a puppet of white forces; a cultural mediator and a promoter of racial warfare; a Prairie maverick and a pan-Canadian patriot. While those representations are supposedly about the same individual, most of them do not have much in common with each other, suggesting that perhaps there is not one Riel but a series of Riels. Most significantly, they also bear little resemblance to their ostensible model, underscoring not

only the fluidity of the Métis leader's image but also his continuing elusiveness even more than a century after his death.

The intangibility of historical figures, of course, is not restricted to Riel. Actually, few writers have better captured the phenomenon than does the nineteenth-century New Zealand author Alan Clyde in his poem about the Maori politician-mystic Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki. As Clyde traces the evolution of the story, first he reads that “‘Te Kooti’s knocked upon the head,/ It’s pretty certain now he’s dead.’” Later, after being told that the Maori leader has “‘killed and eaten’” an enemy officer, the author learns that the government forces have “‘captured all Te Kooti’s squaws,/ We’ve hanged himself and burnt his pahs [fortified settlements]!’” Still later, the “‘rebel host” and his “‘fiends once more appear,/ And all the land is full of fear.’” Yet, when confronted by the New Zealand forces, Te Kooti flees, but not before losing “‘his nose’” in a skirmish with a soldier (5-7):

Then, overjoyed, once more I read,  
 ‘Te Kooti certainly is dead,  
 They’ve brought to camp the traitor’s head.’

This paragraph went on to say,  
 ‘The Government intend to pay  
 One thousand pounds reward to-day!’

Such tidings who on earth could doubt,  
 Te Kooti’s pipe at last put out!

I called my friends and made them shout!

But then, a week or so at most,

Appeared Te Kooti or his ghost,

And with the nose which he had lost! (6)

As Clyde concludes, the media's account of Te Kooti's confrontation with the government forces changes "'from day to day,'/ Thus doth he eat whom he doth slay,/ Yet still gets licked in every fray!" Indeed, the Maori leader already "has lost/ More lives than any cat can boast/ More legs than walk Tasmania's coast" (7).

The elusiveness of historical figures, Clyde intimates with a humour seldom encountered in works about Riel, reflects the multifarious versions of an individual's life or career. The problem, though, is compounded by that person's subsequent cultural reception, the fact that he or she can disappear from the consciousness of a society for decades only to be re-adopted with a fervour that completely masks the earlier neglect. For instance, after having been virtually forgotten since the end of the nineteenth century, Riel was rediscovered by historians in the 1930s and then by fiction writers in the aftermath of World War II. Yet this was only a gradual, and partial, embrace. As late as 1963, the Quebec author Jean-Robert Rémillard entitles a poem about Riel "Pour un pendu oublié." In it, Rémillard describes the Métis leader as "[m]on Tristan mon oublié mon Lorca d'indépendance!" and vows to christen him "en sa canonisation/ Saint-Louis-de-batoche[sic]-Riel-sur-Oubliance" (55). That same year, Margaret Laurence writes to Adele Wiseman that she has "always felt so drawn to that strange man" and wonders "why his story [has] not been done, in dramatic terms, I mean, over and over again, instead of mainly being done

in history books, etc.” (1963, 153). Even more recently, in her influential 1972 guide to Canadian literature, *Survival*, Margaret Atwood declares that “Riel is the perfect all-Canadian failed hero-- he’s French, Indian, Catholic, revolutionary and possibly insane, and he was hanged by the Establishment”.<sup>1</sup> In her words, “Riel’s defeat is absolute, and unlike Brébeuf he doesn’t even get to be a tourist attraction” (1972, 167-8).

Atwood’s assessment of Riel, “the small David battling the Goliath of Ottawa”, has less to do with the Métis leader than it does with the structure of Canadian history, which she claims victimizes the marginal and the powerless. This is in contrast to the Bible, in which “God helps, miracles happen, David wins” (1972, 168). However, at least judging by the portrayals of the politician-mystic in Canadian culture since the Centennial year, perhaps miracles happen even in Canada. As we have seen throughout this study, Riel’s transformation into a Canadian hero is evident in a multitude of novels, poems, and plays. But it is never more conspicuous than in the sagas of three statues that have graced the grounds of the Saskatchewan and Manitoba legislatures.

Produced by the Saskatchewan modernist sculptor John Nugent, and unveiled in Regina by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1968, the first monument had a controversial history from the beginning. It was the “pet” project of Ross Thatcher, the somewhat illiberal, Liberal premier at the time (Kaye 112). Thatcher would seem to be an unlikely champion of Riel, except perhaps for the fact that he too believed he had been entrusted with a divine mission. A former member of Parliament for the socialist Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, the forerunner of the New

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Morisset contends that those are the very reasons that the Métis leader “fut pendu par le système. . . . En fait, Riel avait une identité dans un pays qui n’en avait pas. C’était là une faute impardonable et c’est pourquoi il devra être supprimé” (1980, 307).

Democratic Party, Thatcher not only abandoned his comrades but became convinced that “I’ve been chosen by God to get rid of these socialists.” Although not above evoking Riel’s “sense of justice” during federal-provincial negotiations, Thatcher appears not to have thought any more highly of the Métis leader than he did of his former associates (qtd. in Eisler 129, 219). As one critic charges, the Saskatchewan Premier “despised” Riel and commissioned a statue of him for purely political reasons, “in order to gain the votes of a group of newly enfranchised Indians”. Or as Nugent is reported to have suggested afterwards, “Thatcher would have hanged Riel again had he had the chance” (Kaye 112, 110).

Furthermore, Thatcher possessed not only a conservative political sensibility but also an aesthetic one. He envisaged a realistic statue of Riel “dressed in a mackinaw”, Riel essentially “as the bourgeois, Europeanized, assimilated man” (Kaye 112, 114). Nugent, however, strongly resisted Thatcher’s conception of the Métis leader. A devout Catholic, whose faith is reflected in his production of numerous “liturgical pieces--tabernacles, chalices, monstrances, ciboria”--the artist had a more spiritual vision of the man who believed himself to be the Prophet of the New World. He thus attempted to persuade Thatcher to allow him to create an abstract steel statue of a “soaring” Riel, but the Premier was utterly opposed to what he termed “the modernistic proposal” (Pincus-Witten 15, 18; Thatcher qtd. in Kaye 119). Realizing that Thatcher would never approve a non-representational structure, Nugent finally compromised and agreed to produce a more traditional work, even acquiescing to “a makeshift garment for the leader of the Métis Rebellion though he thought nakedness more proper to the noble yet abjectly reduced condition of the defeated rebels” (Pincus-Witten 22). Yet his statue remains less realistic than classical, portraying Riel naked except for a cloak and seemingly as defiant as ever (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Statue of Riel [1968].

For Nugent, his Riel is “a figure of ‘ultimate humiliation’”. While almost bereft of clothes, he is “still standing in opposition to government policy, his right hand toward the sky, his head tilted back as if he were seeking divine guidance--or, ominously, as if his neck had been snapped by the hangman’s noose” (Kaye 119-20). Unfortunately for the artist, not too many people have shared his enthusiasm for his work. Thatcher appears never to have liked it. The Saskatchewan Métis community too was quite severe in its appraisal of the statue, particularly resenting the fact that Riel’s genitals were visible under his cloak. In fact, the community’s political leadership soon started demanding the removal of the work, arguing that it was both “historically inaccurate” and “demoralizing for Metis people” (qtd. in Kaye 127). Perhaps more surprisingly, even other prominent Saskatchewan artists openly dissociated themselves from Nugent’s work. To quote the well-known representational sculptor Joe Fafard, “It’s an awkward piece that is completely melodramatic and it seems to me it does not speak the language of sculpture. I agree with its removal. I think it should have never been accepted” (qtd. in Kaye 123).<sup>2</sup> So unrelenting was the criticism of Nugent’s Riel that twenty-four years later, in 1991, the Saskatchewan government finally acceded to take it out of public view. Citing the Métis community’s discomfort with the work’s “semi-nudity”, the government approved that “the statue be removed from its present site” and then donated it to the nearby MacKenzie Art Gallery, which now keeps it safely stored in its vault (qtd. in Kaye 122).

The second statue (Fig. 9), unveiled at the back of the Manitoba Legislature in 1971,

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, Fafard has recently undergone an experience similar to Nugent’s. His outdoor sculpture for the city of Regina, “Oskana-ka-asatcki” or “The Place of the Pile of Burned Bones,” has been criticized by members of the Saskatchewan First Nations--including the painter Edward Poitras--as being both historically inaccurate and culturally insensitive (Beatty).



Fig. 9. Statue of Riel [1971].

would suffer an equally ignominious fate. Created by the Franco-Manitoban sculptor Marcien Lemay, it shows a naked and angst-ridden Riel enclosed within two round concrete towers. Considering the subject's overwhelming sense of personal and collective oppression, the conception of the monument would seem to be a legitimate one, with Riel's nakedness and tortured expression symbolizing his endemic poverty and the two cylinders representing the mental institutions in which he was confined against his will (Wells). Yet, like Nugent's work, it has elicited a singularly negative response, an aesthetic and moral condemnation best encapsulated in Tom Wayman's "Canadian Culture: Another Riel Poem" (1988). To quote the British Columbia poet, when Euro-Canadians at last decided "to honor Louis Riel", they created an oversized statue of the Métis leader, but "then stripped him, lashed his wrists/ behind his back," and placed the work "behind" the Manitoba Legislature:

To further mark the shame  
 of his failure to defeat the government of Canada  
 they erected two high cement semicircles  
 to conceal the representation of him.  
 Around the base of these  
 they placed in English and French  
 Riel's quote: 'I consider myself to be  
 the founder of Manitoba.'  
 They carefully didn't say he *was*  
 the founder, just that he considered himself such,  
 thus leaving the issue open-ended,

dependent on your point of view

--in other words, unresolved, confused

or what they insist is

*Canadian.* (30)

Wayman, who is evidently unaware that the tentativeness in the quotation does not originate with Lemay but simply reflects the politician-mystic's own discourse (D. Morton 1974, 314, 322), adds that by the time he saw the statue of Riel, in 1987, someone had "smashed off his genitals/ and gouged a hole in one bent knee." Since the authorities had done nothing about the vandalism, the poet concludes that they must approve of this image of the Métis leader: "bound helpless,/ struck at and spat upon/ by those he meant to aid" (30-1).

The Manitoba Métis political establishment was no less irate than Wayman about Lemay's piece. Even though the statue was commissioned by the Métis provincial politician Jean Allard, the Manitoba Métis Federation mounted a concerted campaign against what its one-time president Angus Spence called the "incongruous monstrosity." In the words of another of the Federation's later presidents, Billyjo Delaronde, Riel "was a good, young and vibrant leader of the Metis people. Without him, there might not have been a Canadian West to speak of." He deserved to be represented in a "more proper, statesmanlike" manner (qtd. in "Riel Statue"). Therefore, claiming that Riel's "naked likeness was undignified", the Manitoba Métis leadership lobbied federal and provincial politicians to contribute to a new monument, both levels of government eventually dispensing "more than \$150,000" (Roberts). Lemay and Allard protested vehemently any attempt to remove the statue, the latter at one point even chaining himself to it. However, their objections were to no avail and, early one morning in 1994, the work was unceremoniously carted away and

relocated across the Red River to a hidden corner of the Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface (“Riel Statue”).

Approximately two years later, in 1996, Lemay’s statue was replaced on the Legislature’s grounds by a new one obviously meant to accentuate Riel’s contribution to Canadian history. The work of the Manitoban sculptor Miguel Joyal, the new monument could perhaps best be described as a specimen of Canadian Populist Realism. Presenting Riel in an overcoat, bow tie, and moccasins, it is celebratory of the Métis leader in a way that Lemay’s more introspective piece could never be (Fig. 10). As a local commentator had anticipated, the Manitoba Métis Federation had finally succeeded in having a statue of Riel that made “him look just as boring and constipated as the other statues that dot the grounds” (Doug Smith). In any case, whether Joyal’s Riel is “statesmanlike” or merely “constipated”, there is little doubt that he is meant to be perceived as a patriarchal figure. With the officious parchment held triumphantly in his hand, he is the founder of Manitoba, or perhaps rather its Great Red Father. In an ironic touch that its promoters may not have intended, Riel dominates the Assiniboine River side of the Legislature, while on the opposite side of the building, facing downtown Winnipeg, stands the province’s Great White Mother, Queen Victoria.

Frances Kaye, who has written a comprehensive study of the controversy over the Nugent and Lemay statues, contends that the quarrel is first an “aesthetic” one. It is a clash about “the legitimate manner to represent” the Métis leader between “highbrow” white artists, who are deeply immersed in Western art traditions, and “lowbrow” Métis for whom those traditions are not only alien but spiritually anathema (107-10). Kaye stresses another reason why the Métis have reacted in such a negative way to the two works. With their nudity or partial nudity, the Nugent



Fig. 10. Statue of Riel [1996].

and Lemay statues not only conjure up “the iconographic tradition of the naked ‘savage’” but, more crucially, raise “the question of Riel and insanity” (109, 124). Ultimately, though, she argues, the dispute is really about the power and ethics of representation, about who has the right to claim the Métis leader as its own. As she puts it, “Part of the problem with the Riel monuments is in making the hero of one group serve as the representative of another larger group [to] which he in some measure opposed” (109).

The removal of the Nugent and Lemay statues and the latter’s replacement by Joyal’s are clearly political acts, establishing as they do the beginning of the official rehabilitation of Riel by different Canadian governments (Roberts). No less important, the imbroglios also mark some of the rare instances in which the Métis have directly affected the image of their nineteenth-century leader. For while it may be true that contemporary Métis dominate the “campaign” to turn Riel into a Father of Confederation, as Desmond Morton asserts (1998), they have had conspicuously little influence over his aesthetic image. In fact, despite Riel’s fervent Métis nationalism, and his concomitant skepticism if not antagonism toward post-Confederation Canada, he has become essentially a Euro-Canadian hero. As bp Nichol writes in “The Long Weekend of Louis Riel” (1978), white Canadians “killed louis riel & by monday they were feeling guilty” (n.p.). To assuage their consciences, they soon began to write about the dead man and have yet to stop, a development that has caused no one more discomfort than to their victim/champion:

outside in the rain louis was dying  
its always these damn white boys writing my story these  
same stupid fuckers that put me down try to make a myth out of  
me            they sit at counters scribbling their plays on napkins

their poems on their sleeves & never see me

hell said george

its the perfect image the perfect metaphor          he's a symbol

said johnny          but he's dead thot billie but didn't say it out

loud          theyre crazy these white boys said louis riel (n.p.)

As Nichol adds, "louis rolled over in his grave & sighed/ its not enough they take your life away with a gun they/ have to take it away with their pens" (n.p.).

To be more precise, Riel has been transformed not just into a white Canadian hero but, increasingly, into an English-speaking one. The only genre in which French-speaking Canadians have become dominant in the treatment of the Métis leader is the cartoon biography, a modest category that begins with Robert Freynet's *Louis Riel en bande dessinée* (1990) and ends with Christian Quesnel's *Le crépuscule des Bois-brûlés* (1995) and Zoran and Toufik's *Louis Riel: le père du Manitoba* (1996). Although at times entertaining, these works are not substantial enough either quantitatively or qualitatively to prevent Riel from becoming an almost exclusively English-Canadian icon. Actually, the one significant contribution they have made is the suggestion that the Guernons rejected the young Métis as a prospective family member less for ethnoracial than for class reasons. As Freynet interprets the situation, a "day-labourer" like Joseph Guernon not only sports a frock, cane, and top hat but, in order to prevent his daughter from marrying "UN MÉTIS, UN VA-NU-PIEDS, UN VAURIEN!" such as Riel, he sends her overseas (Siggins 61; Freynet 16).

Ironically, very few English-speaking writers have explored the inherent contradictions in transforming into a national hero an individual who so unequivocally resists becoming part of the

Canadian political family; someone who, in Nichol's words, spends "his time planning freedom the triumph/ of the metis over the whiteman" (n.p.). One notable exception is the team of Wayne Schmalz and Rex Deverell in *The Riel Commission: An Inquiry into the Survival of a People* (1985). A five-part radio series, only the first segment of which has been published, *The Riel Commission* is the brainchild of Schmalz, a CBC-Radio Saskatchewan producer who determined to investigate "how the 'myth,' the story of Riel and the Métis, had changed from 1885 to the present" (Schmalz 151). Schmalz had been struck by the dramatic change in the perception of Riel in Canadian popular culture, the way that journalists and writers, who supposedly "subscribed to the principle of journalistic objectivity [sic]", barely concealed their support for the Métis and wished that the Canadian forces that battled them had been crushed. Those writers tended to be middle-class whites, "related at least racially to the eastern Canadian militiamen who had been brought out to quell the disturbance, yet here they were urging Riel and Dumont to rout the whites. How could this happen?" Schmalz's answer to his own question is that anyone "writing or speaking about Riel and the Métis in the [nineteen-]eighties was also operating within a myth." Consequently, working in conjunction with the playwright Deverell, he decided "to find out what the myth was and what it told us about ourselves" by producing a documentary radio play in the form of a commission of inquiry, that "typically Canadian way of getting at the root of a matter and finding solutions to problems." Schmalz organized a "public forum" to which Métis from all walks of life were invited and Deverell then "create[d] the commissioner after all the material had been assembled." That is, in an attempt to reach a higher level of truth about Riel, they consciously fashioned a hybrid work combining a fictional structure with "real people speaking their own thoughts" (Schmalz 151, 153).

*The Riel Commission* was extremely successful, with both the public and the critics. It was broadcast nationally on the CBC program *Ideas* and received a major U.S. radio award for its “creative use of the medium.” It also starred Donald Sutherland as the commissioner, with the veteran actor telling the audience that he was honoured to play the role, since “Louis Riel had been sitting on my back for ten years. He and Norman Bethune had both been my heroes and the guides to my Canadian spirit” (Deverell and Schmalz 62, 64). Yet, in the end, the play is not radically different from the other works on Riel against which the authors juxtapose it. As Schmalz realizes after a number of “natives. . . refused to participate in the series,” regardless of its formal innovations, *The Riel Commission* still channels the “natives’ opinions through the character of a white, middle-class commissioner. . . . Instead of being progressive, I had in fact simply found a new way to keep an old attitude and an outmoded approach entrenched.” In other words, while the story may be about Riel and the Métis, it is controlled by whites. Or as Schmalz phrases it, in more crudely economic terms, “Here, as always before, whites received the money, the air time, the glory, while natives remained the subjects, the specimens, searching futilely for a forum in which to express their realities on their own terms” (Schmalz 153-4).

The control of Riel’s image by white, English-speaking Canadians was perhaps inevitable considering the country’s demographics. Nevertheless, the situation has been exacerbated by the extraordinary lack of interest that most prominent Métis writers have shown toward the subject. For instance, in her groundbreaking memoirs *Half-breed* (1973), Maria Campbell writes passionately about the mystic from Batoche, with one of her more rebellious characters styling himself as the “new Riel.” Still, in a narrative whose central concern is the need to disprove the belief supposedly held by white Canadians that because “they killed Riel. . . they have killed us

too,” the historical Métis leader is virtually absent (74, 11). Similarly, in Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree* (1983), the author has one of her two sister-protagonists give the other a book about Riel in order to instill in her pride in “our heritage.” But again, although April Raintree comes to discern that she must persevere, for “MY PEOPLE, OUR PEOPLE”, there is no indication that Riel plays much of a role in her discovery of her collective identity (44-5, 228). Even Laure Bouvier’s *Une histoire de Métisses* (1995), which traces a Métis woman’s pilgrimage from Montreal to her “géographie originelle” in her native Manitoba, has little place for Riel (11). Set in 1992, the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus’s arrival in the New World, the novel culminates with an epiphany by the protagonist before Riel’s grave in Saint Boniface, in which she realizes not only that the Métis leader’s hanging at Regina was “un meurtre en réalité” but also that he has been denationalized. As she notes, the memorial to the “père du Manitoba” bears no “mention de sa pendaison, ni qu’il est Métis.” Yet, by the time the narrative unravels, the protagonist is back in her adoptive hometown of Montreal, “au milieu des Blancs”, and seemingly no closer to Riel and her Métis ancestors than she was when she began her journey. In her words, “Métisse matée” (100, 102, 186-7)

There are several explanations for the ambivalence that Métis writers exhibit toward Riel. To begin with, there is the sense that he has come to represent the totality of Métis life. As Emma LaRocque remonstrates, “Riel overshadows his own people” (qtd. in Enright 45). There has also been a considerable alienation by contemporary Métis from his linguistic and cultural heritage, especially his all-pervasive and theologically conservative brand of Catholicism. Finally, since most contemporary Métis hail from Western Canada, they tend to feel rather uncomfortable with his Eastern-acquired education; indeed, with his intellectualism. To quote LaRocque again, Riel

eclipses the Métis not only because of the European “hero-oriented treatment of history in which the people are forgotten” but also because “Riel was different from the people. He really believed in civilization.” Consequently, while those writers may consider Riel “a symbolic figure of who the Métis wanted to be” and the personification of “the grave injustice that the Métis people went through”, they tend to find him and his “peaceful way” wanting, particularly when compared to an instinctive leader like Dumont (qtd. in Enright 45; M. Campbell 4-5).

So widely accepted has Dumont become as the quintessential Métis hero that he figures prominently even in works that purport to celebrate Riel, such as Upisask Theatre’s collective creation *Gabrielle* (1985). First staged in Ile-à-la-Crosse, the northern Saskatchewan Cree-Métis community in which Riel’s sister Sara died and is buried, the play is a modern recreation of the North-West Rebellion. It contemplates not only “what might happen if the 1885 ‘rebellion’ were to occur in 1985” but also if it “were to occur in Ile-à-la-Crosse instead of Batoche” and if it “were to be led by a woman--Gabrielle--who is visited by visions of Riel, just as Riel had been visited by visions of God” (Borgerson 49). The eponymous heroine is a graduating law student who, when a multinational oil company discovers oil near Ile-à-la-Crosse, is approached by the community’s leading citizens to draft “a Bill of Rights and take it to the Minister in Regina.” After being repeatedly snubbed by the Minister, Gabrielle persuades those same individuals to “form our own provisional government, just like Riel did” and later takes the Minister hostage in order to establish her government as “the only lawful authority now in existence in the area” (46, 61, 64). Unluckily, the symbolically named “Mr. Scott” has “a heart attack or something” while trying to escape from the well-stocked cabin in which he is being held and dies overnight (67). With the Minister dead, all the Métis promptly abandon the heroine, calling her crazy for insisting that “I

have been seeing” and “speaking to Louis Riel.” The exception is Riel himself who, to the very end, assures her that if “I could have lived I could have continued fighting for the Metis. I knew it in 1885 and I know it now” (67-71). Still, in a play whose protagonist is reputedly inspired by Riel to become the voice of her people, her first name is not Louise but Gabrielle. That is, she is not named after her hero but rather after his military commander.

Dumont, of course, poses the most formidable threat to Riel’s reputation. Particularly for Westerners, both Métis and non-Métis, the master buffalo hunter appears to be a much more palatable hero than the brilliant but “unstable. . . Moses” whose “hysterical vacillation. . . tied Dumont’s hands” and spelled the end of “the *métis* as a cultural and political possibility” (Stegner 60-2). Riel is also vulnerable from a First Nations perspective. While Blair Stonechild and Bill Waiser undermine their critique of the Métis leader by evaluating his words out of context, they have amply demonstrated how difficult it will be to continue to portray him as an unproblematic promoter of the First Nations (77, 115, 197). Nevertheless, it might be premature to prophesy that Riel will soon vanish from the consciousness of Canadians. To quote the Métis poet Marilyn Dumont’s “Letter to Sir John A. Macdonald” (1996), “Riel is dead/ but he just keeps coming back” (52). Or as the British Columbia poet Lyle Neff writes in “Riel’s Last Letter from Vancouver” (1997), “whenever I die,/ I get new ideas” (17). The reason that Riel is likely to keep inspiring Canadian writers, however, is not that, “after all that shuffling us around to suit the settlers,/ we’re still here and Metis”, as Marilyn Dumont suggests (52). Rather, it is because he has been embraced as a forebear by the descendants of those very settlers, people who, like Paul Savoie, need him in order to realize themselves both as citizens and as artists (1984, 109). This is especially true of English-speaking Canadians, for many of whom Riel seems to have come to

represent their single most important link to the nation's pre-European past.

Riel's apparent emergence as the only feasible Anglo-Canadian hero is not easy to fathom. George Woodcock has provided one interesting explanation for the politician-mystic's appeal to white Canadians, stating that--unlike the author's hero, Dumont--Riel "belongs to a world like our own, more conscious of twilight than of dawn." As Woodcock elaborates, Riel "seems the personification of a besieged minority, and most Canadians see themselves as members of besieged minorities. He is a victim, and most modern men (not Canadians only, by any means) gain satisfaction from seeing themselves as victims." Doug Fetherling tends to agree with Woodcock's statement, although he stresses that the reason "we admire Riel" is that he is "so close to us materially and culturally," with one foot in the "the buffalo hunts of another age" and the other "in our own" (Woodcock 1975, 14; Fetherling 28). Indeed, much of Riel's attraction to Euro-Canadians in general and Anglo-Canadians in particular probably lies less in his foreignness than in his familiarity. With his considerable European genetic and cultural heritage--as well as his occasional ecumenism and multiculturalism--Riel can legitimately be assimilated into the white Canadian world in a way that very few other pre-twentieth-century Métis or First Nations political figures ever could. He thus becomes the ideal human bridge between the Euro-Canadians and not just the First Nations but Canada itself.

Anglo-Canadians, like their francophone compatriots and the non-First Nations citizens of other settlers societies in the Americas and elsewhere, necessarily have a complicated relationship with their land and its first inhabitants, a schizophrenia that reflects their despairing fear of being perpetual foreigners in their native landscape. As Terry Goldie captures the dilemma, "The white Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous

and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada?" The solution for some writers has been to attempt to efface "the alien within" by embarking on a nativist "genealogical" quest (Goldie 12; Kroetsch 1989a, 64). In John Newlove's often-quoted words in "The Pride," white Canadians may not be biologically related to the First Nations but they are in the process of being indigenized:

..... until at  
 last we become them  
  
 in our desires, our desires,  
 mirages, mirrors, that are theirs, hard-  
 riding desires, and they  
 become our true forebears, moulded  
 by the same wind or rain,  
 and in this land we  
 are their people, come  
 back to life. (111)

Or as Frye interprets Newlove's poem, by identifying with the First Nations, "white Canadians, in their imaginations, are no longer immigrants but are becoming indigenous, recreating the kind of attitudes appropriate to people who really belong here" (1977, 40).

Of course, the complication with the "desperate longing" by white people to claim kinship with the First Nations is that the latter "may not particularly *want* to be our ancestors" and might even find such filiation immoral, a calculated attempt "to appropriate the American Indian

imagination in the same way the colonists appropriate the land and resources of the New World” (Atwood 1995, 60; Cook-Lynn 39). The process may also be deliberately self-delusional and self-serving. As Gwendolyn MacEwen writes in one of her poems, Euro-Canadians “want to pretend” that First Nations peoples are their ancestors:

**You who never knew the evil in us, you who have**

no opposite of Manitou,

**Come out from behind the thunder and embrace us--**

**All we long to become, all we have known of ourselves.**

**Before you are gone from our eyes forever--**

(you who are certainly not our ancestors)

**Teach us our names, the names of our cities.**

**No one ever welcomed us when we came to this land. (73)**

In other words, the relationship is suspect because it is so devoid of reciprocity. White people are asking to be “welcomed” into what is now their land, to finally be made to feel at home. Yet they seem prepared to contribute nothing to their hosts. Indeed, as in many works on Riel, they barely acknowledge their separate existence.

Perhaps one ought to rejoice about the fact that so many Euro-Canadians have come to embrace Riel as an ancestor, the quintessential Canadian. There seems to be nothing intrinsically negative about their using the Métis leader to indigenize themselves. However, one must contain one's euphoria since there is such a palpable sense of unreality about most representations of the

David of the New World, as is evident in the fact that he is often missing from narratives that are ostensibly about him. Considering his aversion to Confederation, his British-American citizenship, as well as his Métisness, Riel could have been an enemy of Canada but almost certainly not a “traitor,” false or otherwise. But, for those very same reasons, he can be transformed into a Canadian patriot only if one denies his own story, his specificity and his alterity. Needless to say, this is precisely what has happened in most of the works about Riel, not only in the more xenophobic nineteenth century but right up to the present. In fact, it could be argued that the most common trait of the literature on Riel from Edmund Collins, through Elzéar Paquin, to Rudy Wiebe is that it is less about its purported subject than it is about Euro-Canadian society. The Afro-American writer James Baldwin once asserted that segregation had been so successful in the U.S. South that it had “allowed white people, with scarcely any pangs of conscience whatever, to *create*, in every generation, only the Negro they wished to see” (65). Arguably, that is also the most significant aspect of the representations of Riel. They are important not because of what they tell us about Riel but because of what they reveal about Euro-Canada, the dominant sector of Canadian society that for over a century has been able to create only the Riel it wishes to see--or needs.

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