LOUIS RIEL

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Thomas Flanagan was born in Ottawa, Illinois, in 1944. After studying at Notre Dame University in Indiana (B.A.), Duke University in North Carolina (M.A., Ph.D.), and the Free University of West Berlin, he has taught political science at the University of Calgary since 1968. He has also served as Head of the Political Science Department and Assistant to the President of the University. The author of numerous books and articles on Louis Riel, some of which are listed in the bibliography of this booklet, he was one of the editors of *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel*. His work on Riel has been honoured with the Prix Champlain and the University of British Columbia Canadian Biography Medal. Other topics on which he has written are aboriginal rights and native land claims, human rights and anti-discrimination policy, millenarian movements, and the history of Alberta Social Credit. His *Introduction to Government and Politics* (with Mark O. Dickerson), which went into its third edition in 1990, is widely used as a textbook in Canadian universities and colleges.
LOUIS RIEL

Louis Riel is perhaps the most prominent name in Canadian history. In his brief political career, he personified the enduring antagonisms of Canadian history: French against English, native against white, West against East. Not surprisingly, there is intense controversy over the significance of his life. He has been called a rebel and a patriot, a villain and a hero, a madman and a saint — and still the debate continues.

Inevitably, a great deal has been written about him by his contemporaries and by later historians. Although this older work is still indispensable, much new information has come to light in the last two decades. Archival researchers have discovered new sources and gone over old ones with new questions in mind; and the large body of Riel’s manuscripts has been edited, read, and analysed more carefully than ever before. Recent developments in social and economic history have also revealed much about Riel’s people, the Metis of the Canadian West.

This essay presents an overview of Riel’s life using the wealth of new information now available. In so doing, it departs in many respects from the received image of Riel, which in large part derives from the work of George F.G. Stanley.* Louis Riel was such an extraordinarily complex and puzzling man that no two writers ever see him in the same way. In the end, there will always remain many issues on which readers will have to make up their own minds.

Red River Colony

The Metis whom Louis Riel later championed were descended from the two groups of fur traders who were the first Europeans to visit what is now Western Canada — the English and Scottish employees of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the mostly French employees of the companies operating out of Montreal, the famed voyageurs. Both groups of men spent many years in the North West without white women and established relationships with Indian women. Thus arose two partly related, partly distinct mixed-race groups: the English-speaking, Protestant Halfbreeds and the French-speaking, Catholic Metis. Both groups will hereafter be referred to as Metis unless there is a need to distinguish them.

*The reader may wish to compare this pamphlet with Stanley’s Louis Riel: Patriot or Rebel? (Ottawa, 1956), Canadian Historical Association Booklet No. 2, which is now out of print.
After 1821, the merger of the fur trade rivals under the name of the Hudson’s Bay Company left many redundant employees. The Company encouraged these surplus men to settle with their native families at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, where Scottish farmers had already founded a settlement under the inspiration of Lord Selkirk. Thus arose something unique in North America: a settled agricultural community of whites and Metis living in the heart of the continent, hundreds or thousands of miles from other projections of European civilization.

The English Halfbreeds gathered near the Selkirk settlers in the northern end of the colony in parishes along the Red River with names like St. Andrew’s and St. Clement’s. As the years went by, the numbers of the English were augmented by immigrants from Upper Canada and the United States, who often opened businesses near the Forks, forming the nucleus of the future city of Winnipeg. The French Metis lived further south along the Red River in St. Boniface, St. Vital, and St. Norbert, and west along the Assiniboine at White Horse Plains. There were also some French Canadians, particularly in St. Boniface but also scattered throughout the other parishes. Although a few areas of mixed settlement arose near the Forks, the two linguistic groups lived largely apart from one another.

It cannot be stressed too strongly that this dualistic society was a settled community with churches, schools, a newspaper, English law, courts, and other aspects of Western civilization. One pillar of the economy was agriculture. Both English and French farmed long narrow lots fronting the rivers, where they cultivated grain and vegetables and pastured livestock. The other pillar of the economy was the fur trade and related buffalo hunt. The Metis sent large expeditions out to the prairies to hunt buffalo for robes and pemmican, which they sold to the Hudson’s Bay Company and, starting in the 1840s, to American traders working out of St. Paul in Minnesota. The Hudson’s Bay Company tried unsuccessfully to prevent this competition, but had to give up after a confrontation with the Metis in 1849. The Metis also played a role as specialists in transportation, running the cart trains and boat brigades that linked the Company’s many posts together.

**Childhood and Education**

Louis Riel’s was not a typical Metis family. Only one of his eight great-grandparents was an Indian. Louis Riel *père*, though born in the North West, lived most of his childhood in Quebec. He also spent a year in an
Oblate novitiate, hoping to become the first Metis missionary to the North West. After deciding that he did not have a religious vocation, he settled down in Red River to support himself as a farmer and miller. Although not a leading man in the community, he was an outspoken advocate of Metis rights and played an important role in the aforementioned free trade episode of 1849.

Louis’s mother, Julie Lagimodièr, was white, not Metis. Her mother, Marie-Anne Gouby, had been the first white woman to live permanently in the North West, and the Lagimodièr family was large and influential in Red River. As a child, Julie had also dreamed of a religious vocation, but had been dissuaded by her parents. Louis, as the oldest child, seems to have inherited the religious ambitions of both parents. After receiving a basic education in St. Boniface, he went to Montreal at age fourteen to attend the minor seminary of St. Sulpice, commonly known as the College of Montreal. He expected to get his baccalaureate, study for the priesthood, then return to the North West as a missionary. Interestingly, Riel’s oldest sister, Sara, also entered the religious life, becoming a Grey Nun at St. Boniface and later at Ile à la Crosse in northern Saskatchewan.

Riel spent several successful years at the College, studying Latin, Greek, and classical French literature. He wrote poetry, particularly animal fables modelled on those of La Fontaine, that should entitle him to a minor place in French-Canadian literature. Then his plans went off the tracks. When he learned of his father’s death in 1864, he spent a good deal of time with an aunt and uncle, John and Lucie Lee, near Montreal. There he fell in love with Marie-Julie Guernon — a development incompatible with his religious vocation. He began to chafe under and to violate the strict discipline of the College until he was expelled in March 1865, just a few months before he would have graduated.

He went to live with the Lees while he looked for work, but he did not find anything for over a year. In the spring of 1866, he finally began to read law with the prominent rouge lawyer and politician Rodolphe Laflamme — a striking change from the Conservative politics of the Sulpician Fathers at the College.

Louis and Marie-Julie signed a marriage contract in June, but her parents apparently opposed the wedding, and Riel suddenly left Montreal a week later. He had no college degree, no job, no wife, no prospects. Almost nothing is known about the next two years, except that he seems
to have lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he had an uncle. He returned to Red River in July 1868 because drought and famine threatened to impose hardship upon his mother and eight younger brothers and sisters.

This whole course of events left Louis troubled with a deep sense of guilt. He felt he had betrayed Bishop A.-A. Taché of St. Boniface and the others who had arranged for him to study and had paid his expenses at the College. He had disobeyed God’s will by giving up his vocation and had neglected to take care of his own family after his father’s death. In a personal sense, Riel’s vaulting ambition and radical politics can best be understood as an attempt to atone for these youthful sins.

**Red River Resistance**

Everyone knew that the political status of Red River would have to change. As a proprietary colony of the Hudson’s Bay Company, it was more in tune with the seventeenth than the nineteenth century. The Company’s Governor was finding it ever harder to control the growing population, and the increasing presence and power of the United States made American annexation of the North West seem like a real possibility. Moreover, the old economy was jeopardized by the decline in the number of buffalo as they retreated further westward.

Faced with these pressures, in March 1869, the Company sold to Canada its rights in Rupert’s Land for £300,000 plus a considerable acreage of fertile land. Canada was to take possession of its new territory on December 1, 1869, thus advancing the Canadian dream of a great nation extending from sea to sea: *a mari usque ad mare*. The Canadian government planned to send William McDougall, who had played a role in acquiring Rubert’s Land, to be Canada’s first colonial governor. Self-governing provinces would someday be created in the North West as new members of Confederation, but for now Canada would act as a colonial power over the former Company lands and govern the territories directly.

Canada, Britain, and the Hudson’s Bay Company were happy with this arrangement, but no one had consulted the twelve thousand inhabitants of Red River. Some were understandably worried that the new government might upset their way of life and even threaten the ownership of the lands on which they lived. Fears arose when the Dominion government began building roads and tracing outline surveys before the date of transfer to Canadian jurisdiction.

Opposition took visible form on October 11, 1869, when a group of surveyors approached the “outer two miles” (a rear pasture area) of St.
Vital parish and a group of Metis, whose spokesman was Louis Riel, told them to leave. The Metis proceeded to organize a "National Committee" with John Bruce as figurehead president and Louis Riel as secretary and motive force. The advice of two priests, Georges Dugast and N.-J. Ritchot, was also important in these early days. Through a fateful coincidence, Bishop A.-A. Taché of St. Boniface was in Rome for the Vatican Council; if he had been at home, he might well have used his moral authority with the Metis and his extensive contacts with Canadian politicians to mediate the misunderstandings and head off the resistance movement.

In Taché's absence, the movement escalated rapidly. The National Committee sent men south to the American border who, on November 2, prevented Governor McDougall from entering the colony. The Metis then took possession of the strategic Fort Garry and invited the English parishes to send delegates for discussions. On December 1, McDougall briefly crossed into Canada and read a proclamation announcing the transfer to Canadian jurisdiction — a serious mistake, because he had no power to enforce it, and a letter from Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald telling him to move cautiously was still in the mail.

Riel reacted vigorously to McDougall's move. His men arrested a number of Canadians and English Halfbreeds who were combining to oppose the Metis movement. On December 8, Riel issued the "Declaration of the People of Rupert's Land and the North West," announcing the formation of a Provisional Government with John Bruce as President and himself as Secretary. The Declaration argued that the people of Rupert's Land were free to govern themselves because they had been abandoned by the Hudson's Bay Company and could not be sold to Canada without their consent.

The Metis were now in control of Red River, and Canada's options were not attractive. The American government would not let the Canadian militia cross the United States, and without a railroad across the Canadian Shield, there was no way to get a Canadian military force to Red River until next summer. If Canada antagonized the Metis further, they might seek union with the United States. The only realistic alternative was to negotiate with the insurgents, who were not rebels against the Crown, even if they were resisting unilateral annexation by Canada. They only wanted "better terms" on which to enter Confederation.

Macdonald quickly sent three envoys to Red River, of whom the most effective was Donald A. Smith, later Lord Strathcona, of the Hudson's
Bay Company. Smith convinced Riel, who had quickly become President of the Provisional Government, to let him address the assembled Metis in Fort Garry, where he invited them to send their grievances to Ottawa. This session was followed by a convention of forty English and French delegates meeting for two weeks in late January and early February 1870. The result was a new List of Rights embodying most of Riel's desires except his cherished demand for immediate provincial status and self-government, a position which he could not impose upon the delegates. The convention also approved a reconstituted Provisional Government, with Riel again as President.

At the height of his power, Riel was in no mood to tolerate another challenge from the Canadian party. When a column of men led by Major Charles Boulton came from Portage la Prairie, hoping to link up with the loyalists from the other English parishes, Riel arrested them and sentenced Boulton to death. He changed his mind about Boulton, but did allow the execution of Thomas Scott, an Ontario Orangeman who had been one of his most active opponents. Scott was hauled before a Metis court martial on March 3 and shot by a firing squad the next day.

Most historians agree with George F.G. Stanley's verdict: "By one unfortunate error of judgment — this is what the execution of Scott amounted to — and by one unnecessary deed of bloodshed — for the Provisional Government was an accomplished fact — Louis Riel set his foot upon the path which led not to glory but to the gibbet." The killing of Scott engendered such hostility elsewhere in Canada that Riel was never able to play his natural role as leader and spokesman of the Metis in Canadian politics.

In the short run, however, this position remained strong. He pressured the Executive of the Provisional Government to make several important additions to the List of Rights, notably a demand for provincial status with control of public lands and the grant of an amnesty for all acts committed during the Resistance. Bishop Taché, when he returned to Red River, added a request for denominational schools to protect the interests of the Catholic Church. In March, the Provisional Government's three delegates — Father N.-J. Ritchot; John Black, the Recorder (judge) of Rupert's Land; and Alfred Scott, an English saloonkeeper — left for Ottawa to negotiate the entry of Rupert's Land into Confederation.

Of the delegates, Ritchot was the most committed to advancing the cause of the Metis, and he represented their interests forcefully to Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir George Etienne Cartier. Two weeks of difficult
negotiations finally led to a compromise agreement embodied in the Manitoba Act, which was quickly passed by Parliament and received royal assent May 15, 1870. There was a new province, to be called Manitoba, but it did not include all of Rupert’s Land, as Riel had wanted. It was a mere “postage stamp” of territory around the Red River settle-
ment. The provincial government, moreover, would not control the public
lands and natural resources of even this tiny territory; they would remain
under the control of the federal government. Finally, Ritchot was not able
to extract a written guarantee of amnesty. He had to be content with
ambiguous verbal promises that left it unclear whether Canadian or
British advisers to the Crown would take responsibility for securing an
amnesty.

Ritchot returned to Red River and, concealing his own misgivings,
presented the Manitoba Act in a favourable light to the settlement. On
June 23, the Assembly voted to accept the deal, although from the official
Canadian point of view no ratification was necessary, since Parliament
and the Governor General had already exercised their sovereign authority
through the Manitoba Act. Adams G. Archibald, a bilingual Nova Scotian
known for his moderation, was named Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba,
a favourable sign for future reconciliation.

Yet conflict still loomed. In the uncertainty of the winter, Macdonald
had made plans to send a military force to Red River. Colonel Garnet
Wolseley, a British career officer, was authorized to lead a mixed force of
British regulars and Canadian militia to Red River after the spring break-
up in northern Ontario. Even with the passage of the Manitoba Act,
Macdonald decided the military expedition was necessary to secure
Canadian authority in the new province. The soldiers were not supposed
to make war on the Metis, but the mood of the members of the Ontario
militia differed from official intention. They had volunteered amidst
“indignation meetings” over the execution of Thomas Scott, and their
difficult trip through the wilderness of northern Ontario made them even
more belligerent. Wolseley did nothing to dispel the impression that there
might be an enemy to fight at the end of the trek.

Members of the Provisional Government were warned by scouts of the
soldiers’ aggressive attitude. They also knew that Wolseley would arrive
ahead of Governor Archibald, so his men would be restrained by civilian
authority. Now that many of the Metis were gone for the summer hunt,
those remaining had neither means nor desire to oppose Wolseley’s men.
On August 23, 1870, Riel slipped out of Fort Garry to the south as
Wolseley’s men entered from the north. Whether correctly or not, he
feared he might be imprisoned or even lynched if he stayed to welcome the expeditionary force.

**Frustration**

Riel went to St. Joseph in the Dakota Territory, beyond the reach of Wolseley's troops, who did indeed carry out reprisals against some of the leaders of the Metis movement. In the months that followed, Riel was back and forth across the border, maintaining political alliances and hoping that the promised amnesty would be issued. In October 1871, he supported Governor Archibald in repelling the Fenian border raid mounted by W.B. O'Donoghue, Riel's erstwhile ally, but instead of an amnesty, it brought only a secret payment of money from Sir John A. Macdonald to leave the country for a while.

Riel and Ambroise Lépine took the money in early 1872 and spent a few months in St. Paul, but they soon returned to Manitoba. Riel then decided to run for the House of Commons. Although his election seemed assured, he withdrew in favour of Sir George Cartier, who had been defeated in Montreal East. Riel hoped this would bring the amnesty, but again he was disappointed. The Canadian government was unwilling to push for an amnesty because of the passions roused by the execution of Thomas Scott.

Things became increasingly dangerous for Riel. Growing numbers of Ontario immigrants made serious efforts to arrest him. When Cartier's death necessitated a by-election, Riel secured a House of Commons seat and travelled east in October 1873. Although now the Member of Parliament for Provencher, he was unable to take his seat in Ottawa because there was an Ontario warrant for his arrest, so he travelled widely in Quebec and the northeastern United States looking for political support. He was twice re-elected during 1874, but could never take his seat except for one melodramatic incident when he entered the House unannounced, signed the Test Roll, and immediately left.

In these months, he became close to the Quebec Ultramontanes, particularly Ignace Bourget, the Bishop of Montreal, and Alphonse Desjardins, the publisher of *Le Nouveau Monde*. Their creed included rejection of liberal modernism, absolute loyalty to the infallible Pope, and belief in a special mission of the French-Canadian people to evangelize North America. This conservative, nationalistic, almost sectarian form of Catholicism had a pronounced impact on Riel's own thinking, reinforcing his growing personal mysticism.
Alexander Mackenzie’s Liberals broke the political stalemate in early 1875 by using their majority in the House of Commons to vote Riel an amnesty conditional upon expulsion from the House and exile from Canada for five years. Meanwhile, Ambroise Lépine was arrested in Manitoba, convicted of Scott’s murder, and sentenced to death, although the Governor General commuted the sentence. Riel saw all this as a travesty of justice, but there was nothing to be done: his supporters were worn out, and the Liberals had a firm grip on power.

As Riel continued his ceaseless travels, he tried in vain to obtain support from American politicians for a military invasion of western Canada. This disappointment caused his religious enthusiasm to grow. All along, he had sustained himself with the thought that while God was punishing him for the youthful sin of giving up his religious vocation, He would show mercy in the end. Now he began to think his reward had come and that God had made him the “Prophet of the New World,” with a special mission to reform the Catholic religion. He underwent a powerful mystical experience while attending mass in Washington, D.C., on December 8, 1875 (the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the favourite day of the Ultramontanes), and his behaviour changed markedly thereafter. He began to speak openly about his divine mission and to talk about his communications from the Holy Spirit.

**Insanity and Prophecy**

Riel’s friends thought his mind had become unhinged. They passed him around from place to place in New England, hoping that he would regain his senses, but he grew more excited and vocal about his mission. In desperation, they took him illegally and secretly across the border to stay with his aunt and uncle in Montreal. In March 1876, John Lee committed his famous nephew, under the false name of Louis R. David, to the asylum of Longue Pointe, a suburb of Montreal. The confinement was kept secret, but was certainly known to Riel’s many influential friends, some of whom were in the Quebec government. None of them seemed concerned at detaining him against his will in a Canadian asylum, even though he was under sentence of exile; they thought they knew what was best for him.

Riel’s stay at Longue Pointe was brief and stormy. He struggled with his keepers, protesting that he was not a madman but an inspired prophet. Fearing that his presence would be discovered and cause a scandal, Riel’s relatives had him transferred in May to the asylum at Beauport outside
Quebec City. He initially fought with his keepers there, as he had done at Longue Pointe, but he gradually calmed down and became a privileged patient, even joining sessions of the local *Cercle catholique*, an Ultramontane discussion club.

Riel wrote at length in the enforced leisure of the asylums — essays and poetry as well as long letters to Bishop Bourget. As a result, a good deal is known about the revelations that he claimed to receive from the Holy Spirit. Their central theme was self-glorification. Riel dubbed himself the “Prophet of the New World,” endowed by God with a mission to renew religious faith in North America. As a prophet, he saw his role to communicate God’s revelations to mankind; in a poem he called himself the “joyful telephone” of God (Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876).

Even more grandiosely, he styled himself “Louis ‘David’ Riel: Prophet, Priest-King, Infallible Pontiff.” He adopted the middle name “David” to emphasize his similarity with the Biblical David. As David was the divinely selected king of the embattled Hebrews, so Riel saw himself as the inspired leader of the persecuted Metis. He was also a “priest” by special spiritual ordination, thus achieving his youthful ambition. Even better, he was “infallible” — no more political blunders like the execution of Thomas Scott.

In Riel’s world view, the Metis were a Chosen People (*peuple sacerdotal*). They were literally descended from the first Chosen People, for God revealed to Riel that the Indians of North America were descendants of Hebrews who had crossed the Atlantic Ocean. The Metis, moreover, had inherited the mission of the French Canadians to evangelize the New World. Riel here went his Ultramontane mentors one better by transferring their messianic sense of nationalism from their people, the French Canadians, to his people, the Metis.

As a Chosen People descended from the Hebrews, the Metis should revive the Mosaic Law, or at least parts of it. Riel blamed St. Paul for allowing Christians to depart from the Old Law. Now it was time to return to such Jewish practices as the Saturday Sabbath, married clergy, and male circumcision. Even more controversially, Riel wanted to revive polygamy as a form of marriage and to introduce brother-sister incest under certain circumstances, conditions that bore a striking resemblance to the course of his own life.

Such radical changes in doctrine and morality necessitated in Riel’s mind a break with Rome. He wrote that the Roman popes, first Pius IX, then Leo XIII, had lost the approval of the Holy Spirit because they had become too “liberal,” had made too many concessions to the modern
world. He wanted Bishop Bourget to accept his revelations and become Pope of the New World. Eventually the papacy of this new North American *église catholique, apostolique et vitale* would be transferred from Montreal to St. Vital, Riel’s home in Manitoba.

The new order was to be theocratic in character with religious leaders acting as political rulers, exercising “charitable coercion” to guide their flock to the truth. Riel reserved his harshest denunciation for “liberalism,” which he equated with the secularizing, democratic tendencies of nineteenth-century Western civilization. In this respect, he took his bearings through the Quebec Ultras from the European reactionary conservatism of “throne and altar.” Riel’s heroes were royalist pretenders, such as “Charles VII” of Spain and “Henry V” of France; after the latter’s death, Riel even imagined himself ascending to the French throne of the Bourbons.

Underlying this sweeping vision of religious reform was a millenarian conception of history. Riel saw himself as a prophetic precursor of the Second Coming, whose task was to purge the Catholic Church and bring it to the highest state of perfection before the end of history. He was the rider on the pale horse depicted in the Apocalypse (6:1-2):

The Apocalypse is a trustworthy guide which I have never understood. But now I can explain its parables and its divine numbers. The Lord Jesus Christ tells me:

Louis, you are Louis: you are the knight to whom I give my white horse of the Apocalypse. The Lord Jesus Christ tells me: David, you are David: you will chant the psalms of my glory till the end. Your throne is established for ever.

The Lord Jesus Christ tells me: Riel, you are Riel. I will give you strength of body and soul against the spiritual and temporal enemies of my catholic, apostolic, and vital church of the Shining Mountains.

Strange as Riel’s teaching may seem, it is typical of the doctrines propounded by millenarian prophets past and present. Those interested in understanding Riel as a religious figure should compare him with the medieval prophets described in Norman Cohn’s classic work, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, or with more recent politico-religious leaders, such as Joseph Smith, the founder of the Mormons.

Millenarianism tends to arise at times of crisis in the life of a people, when traditional beliefs and modes of action are failing. Expectation of a glorious future replaces faith in the certainties of the past. Riel’s
millenarian outburst was a response not only to the political reverses of his own career, but also to the crisis of the Metis people. Their traditional economy of hunting, trapping, and trading was rapidly coming to an end as the buffalo disappeared and white farmers populated the prairies. The Metis were threatened with the submergence of their separate ethnic entity. Riel’s new religion, which proclaimed the Metis a Chosen People, was a message of hope in the face of this threat.

In ages of robust religious faith, individuals who publicly claim the role of millenarian prophet are often labelled heretics and imprisoned or executed by the authorities of church and state. In our own age, when medicine has largely taken over the role of religion, these individuals are apt to be considered insane and put in a hospital — the fate which overtook Riel. In spite, or perhaps because of, his excited state of mind, he understood the situation well and inveighed poetically against the coercive use of medical power:

Medical hostility
Pokes and probes my body’s debility.
The better to flaunt the control they maintain,
Forgetting God in their vain illusions,
And clinging to their proud delusions,
The doctors of the flesh hide me among the insane.

Historians and psychiatrists have debated the question, “Was Riel really insane?” But to put the question that way presupposes that insanity is an objectively definable condition like AIDS, whereas it is actually more like obesity. Some people might be considered too fat (crazy) in any society, but there is substantial variation in what societies will consider an attractive and healthy body shape (normal behaviour). In the eastern United States and Canada in 1875, the “Prophet of the New World” seemed obviously insane; at Batoche in 1885, he appeared not only sane but genuinely inspired in the eyes of his Metis followers. The goal for historians should be to depict what Riel said and did, and how others reacted to him, not to engage in retrospective pseudo-diagnosis. Contemporary students of the mind might do well to take another look at Riel and place him in the ongoing debate over the nature of mental illness and the rights of mental patients.

American Interlude

Riel was discharged from Beauport asylum on January 23, 1878, cured “more or less,” his doctor later said. He went to stay with Father Fabien
Barnabé in Keeseville, New York, where he fell in love with the priest’s sister, Evelina. Louis and Evelina wanted to get married, but how was he to support her? Unable to find suitable employment in the East, Riel thought of becoming a farmer in the western United States. He could sell some land he owned in Manitoba to get the capital to establish himself.

In December 1878, he went to Pembina, Dakota, to be closer to the Manitoba real estate market. On the way, he stopped in St. Paul and tried to interest Bishop John Ireland in a scheme to colonize the American prairies with French immigrants, but the cautious bishop was reluctant to get involved with the political firebrand. It took until midsummer 1879 for Riel to sell his land, and by the time he paid his debts, the proceeds were not enough to set himself up as a farmer. Borrowing some money, Riel departed in August with a group of Metis traders going to Montana. He hoped to make his fortune on the “last frontier,” and the thought of marriage with Evelina was receding from his mind.

Riel joined a large band of Metis buffalo hunters in Montana and became their spokesman, if not their leader. Over the winter of 1879-80, he embarked on a desperate scheme to organize a military confederation of Metis and Indians and invade western Canada. He tried to make an alliance with Poundmaker, Big Bear, Sitting Bull, and other chiefs in the region, but they would not let themselves be mobilized for Riel’s purposes. He then unsuccessfully asked the American authorities to grant the Metis a reserve in Montana.

After the failure of these projects, Riel concentrated on supporting himself as a trader with the Metis following the last buffalo herds in Montana. Sale of some land in Manitoba enabled him to marry Marguerite Monet dit Bellehumeur, the daughter of a Metis buffalo hunter, on April 28, 1881. She bore him a son, Jean, and a daughter, Marie-Angélique, in the next two years.

Riel also involved himself in Montana politics, working for the Republicans in the elections of November 1882. In cooperation with his Republican friends, he launched a private lawsuit against Simon Pépin, who traded liquor for C.A. Broadwater, a Democratic stalwart. But these efforts backfired. His lawsuit failed, and he himself was charged with vote fraud for having induced British subjects to vote in an American election.

Despite these disappointments, Riel became an American citizen on March 16, 1883. In the spring of that year, he also moved to St. Peter’s Mission on the Sun River to become a schoolteacher. The last buffalo had been shot, and he could no longer make a living as a trader. He would have to settle down in order to support his wife and children.
His banishment having expired, Riel could now visit Canada, so he went to Winnipeg in the summer to attend a sister’s wedding and to try to sell scrip and other Manitoba land claims of some Metis then living in Montana. But the great Manitoba real estate boom had ended in 1882, and Riel returned to Sun River with little money in his pocket.

The winter of 1883-84 was a hard one. Riel’s family lived in poverty, and he was deeply depressed. Yet he was sustained by his belief in his divine mission, which he had never given up. He drafted and redrafted letters to Bishop Bourget, seeking confirmation of his mission. He also wrote at length about the secret doctrine that he wanted to reveal to the world. He also wrote at least one book, entitled Massinahican (the Cree word for Bible), which has been lost except for a few fragments.

His mood improved temporarily in the spring, perhaps because a buyer had been found for some land belonging to Marguerite, and he could look forward to getting money for his hard-pressed family. He heard the Holy Spirit say words of comfort to him around Easter: “You must march out in front” and “Believe with confidence.” Then came further bouts of alternating despair and elation. At such an impasse in Montana, Riel was ready for something new.

North-West Rebellion

On June 4, 1884, a delegation of four Metis led by Gabriel Dumont arrived at St. Peter’s Mission from the St. Laurent settlement on the South Saskatchewan River. They had come to invite Riel to return with them to assume leadership of a political movement for redress of grievances.

The St. Laurent settlement consisted of French-speaking Metis living on river lots on both sides of the South Saskatchewan for about twenty miles. Some of them, including Gabriel Dumont, were plains hunters who had settled on the river when buffalo hunting gave out. Others, now more numerous, were emigrants from Manitoba. North of them was a further stretch of river bank inhabited in the same way by English-speaking Halfbreeds. There was a concentration of white settlers at Prince Albert, and there were also several Indian reserves in the area.

The decision to send for Riel, which had support in all ethnic communities, followed a period of discontent and protest meetings. The grievances of the white settlers, many of whom were partisan Liberals, were political and economic: anger at the Canadian Pacific’s decision to take the southern route for the transcontinental railway, thus ruining their
hopes for a commercial boom in Prince Albert; impatience with continuing territorial (colonial) status; and many irritations connected with the administration of Dominion Lands.

The grievances of the Metis had mainly to do with land. They wanted a distribution of land benefits as had occurred in Manitoba, where the government had given 240 acres of land to each Metis child and $160 scrip to each Metis adult. Legislation for similar benefits in the North West Territories had been passed but never implemented. The Metis were also concerned about getting title to the river lots that they had staked out for themselves ahead of, or sometimes in defiance of, the Dominion Lands Survey. The Department of the Interior had offered a method for them to register their claims, but the Metis demanded a resurvey on the ground.

Eagerly accepting the delegation's invitation, Riel arrived in the St. Laurent settlement at the beginning of July. In close co-operation with William Henry Jackson, a young white man from Prince Albert, he organized a series of meetings to unite all settlers in the region behind a petition of grievances. The result was a document sent to the Secretary of State for Canada on December 16, 1884.

While all of this was peaceful and legal, Riel's imagination soared above the mundane grievances of the settlers. He had developed a theory in which the Metis and Indians were still the true owners of the entire North West because the Canadian government had not fulfilled its obligations under the Manitoba Act, or "Manitoba Treaty," as he liked to call it. Rectification of specific grievances was a step towards forcing Canada to renegotiate the entry of the North West into Confederation. The Metis might even try to form their own government under the law of nations, as they had done fifteen years ago in Red River. Also filling Riel's mind was his prophetic mission. Quietly at first, he began to divulge the details to a few confidants, laying the groundwork for a public revelation.

After submitting the petition of grievances, Riel worked behind the scenes with Jackson on a more radical "Bill of Rights" that might lead to a declaration of independence. He also tried to get money for himself by asking D.H. Macdowall, the local member of the Territorial Legislature, and Father Alexis Andrè, Superior of the Oblate missionaries, to intercede for him with Ottawa. He reportedly promised to leave Canada if the federal government would pay him several thousand dollars. Riel saw this not as a bribe, but as an "indemnity" for his past services to Canada and for the injustices inflicted upon him.
Sir John A. Macdonald had bribed Riel to leave the country in 1872, but he was not about to do it again. In February 1885, Riel learned that he would get no money, about the same time as the government rather clumsily communicated to the Metis its initiatives to resolve their land grievances. A commission would be appointed to enumerate the Metis preparatory to an issue of scrip, and they were invited to register their river lot claims at the Dominion Lands Office in Prince Albert.

Riel, now bitterly disappointed, led his followers to perceive these modest concessions as a provocative denial of their rights. His rhetoric grew steadily more inflammatory, until the Metis committed themselves to an armed rising on March 18, 1885, the feast of St. Joseph, Riel’s chosen patron saint. Only the French followed Riel on this radical path; the whites and English Halfbreeds, with a handful of exceptions, were not willing to support an insurrection.

From the outset, the uprising was as much a religious as a political movement. One of Riel’s first acts was to seize the church at Batoche and announce to his followers, “Rome has fallen!” He revealed his new religion to the Metis, put the missionaries under house arrest, and presided over his own religious ceremonies.

The Metis elected a provisional government known as the “Exovedate,” a name Riel contrived from the Latin words ex (“from”) and ovile (“flock”). Riel sometimes used the title of Exovede for himself, and he dominated the proceedings of the Exovedate, although technically he was not a member. The Exovedate conferred the title of “prophet” upon him and also voted to break with Rome and adopt the Saturday Sabbath. He apparently did not tell them about his more radical doctrines of circumcision, polygamy, and incest.

The Metis began the uprising by taking hostages and cutting telegraph lines. Actual fighting broke out on March 26 at nearby Duck Lake, when a column of North West Mounted Police and volunteers from Prince Albert encountered the insurgents. Led by Gabriel Dumont, the Metis secured better field position and badly defeated their opponents, killing a dozen of them and turning a civil disturbance into open, armed rebellion.

A period of waiting ensued as each side mustered its forces. The Metis fortified Batoche and sent messages to other Metis communities and Indian tribes, urging them to make common cause. Some of the Stonies and Crees, particularly Poundmaker and Big Bear’s bands, rose in arms, but there was never a joint strategy. The Indians were incited by the
example of the Metis, but were never under their control. Their uprising, nonetheless, was even more frightening to the authorities than that of the Metis.

In Ottawa, the government quickly decided to put down the Rebellion with as much force as necessary. Major-General Frederick Middleton, the British career officer in charge of the Canadian Militia, was authorized to lead an expeditionary force to the North West. Several battalions were raised in Ontario and Quebec and quickly dispatched to the West on the Canadian Pacific Railway. The line was almost, but not quite complete, so three thousand men had to struggle in carts and sleighs over stretches of rough country in northern Ontario on the way to Winnipeg. The CPR, incidentally, was floundering near bankruptcy at this point and was saved by the Rebellion, a coincidence that has ever since led conspiracy theorists to depict the Rebellion as a plot by Macdonald to bail his railway friends out of trouble.

The strategic situation of the North-West Rebellion was far different from that of the Red River Resistance. In 1885, Canada possessed an internationally recognized title to the North West, and the CPR gave it immediate capacity to project military power into the region. Once Canada decided to fight, the outcome was a foregone conclusion.

Middleton sent his French-Canadian troops to Alberta to pacify the Blackfoot and to pursue Big Bear’s rebellious Cree. He sent another column, commanded by Colonel William Otter, to relieve the town of Battleford, which had been surrounded by Poundmaker’s band. He himself led a column north from Qu’Appelle to crush the Metis at Batoche.

On April 24, the Metis ambushed Middleton at Fish Creek and temporarily checked him, while Otter rushed into an almost disastrous engagement with Poundmaker at Cut Knife Hill on May 2. But overwhelming force prevailed in the end. Middleton took Batoche after four days of fighting, May 9-12. Although the Metis had built an effective system of trenches and defended themselves bravely, they were outnumbered and outgunned. The Indians were never defeated in a pitched battle, but they were forced to retreat off the plains into the northern forest, where they scattered into smaller groups that came down to surrender during the summer.

By the standards of nineteenth-century warfare, the casualties of the North-West Rebellion were slight. Twelve volunteers were killed at Duck
Lake, 26 soldiers died at Fish Creek, Batoche, and Cut Knife, and another 14 perished from disease or accident during the campaign. Riel's forces suffered five fatalities at Duck Lake, another five at Fish Creek, and an unknown number at Batoche (estimates vary from 21 to 51). Indian losses are not known with any accuracy. Probably fewer than 150 people lost their lives from all causes during the Rebellion. Yet the political significance of the Rebellion was immense, for it showed that Canada could and would control the North West, and that native peoples would have to adapt to the new order and could not expect to renegotiate the terms in any fundamental way.

**Trial and Execution**

Although Gabriel Dumont and others escaped to the United States, Riel surrendered voluntarily on May 15. He hoped to have a trial before the Supreme Court of Canada, which he could use to explain his actions to the world, but the law did not provide for such a showcase. He was sent to the NWMP jail in Regina, to be held for trial before a stipendiary magistrate.

Friends and supporters in Quebec quickly rallied to help the penniless Metis leader. F.-X. Lemieux and Charles Fitzpatrick, two able young lawyers who later became distinguished judges, were engaged to serve as defence counsel. Riel would need all the help he could get, for the government had decided to make an example of him. He was charged with treason, for which the only penalty was death. All other Metis involved in the Rebellion were charged with the lesser offence of treason-felony. (Indians received less clemency; eight were hanged for the murder of civilians.)

Riel's trial was held July 28-August 1 in Regina before magistrate Hugh Richardson and a jury of six, as required by the North-West Territories Act. The jurors, selected from around the Regina area, were all white and Protestant. Since the strategy of Riel's counsel was to plead "not guilty by reason of insanity," they brought forward doctors and other witnesses to testify that Riel was not responsible for his actions. Riel did not approve of this defence, but since he had no money to hire other lawyers, he had to allow Fitzpatrick and Lemieux to make their argument. Nonetheless, he intervened as often as he could to proclaim his sanity. It was the government, he quipped, that was "irresponsible"; he defended his own actions as justified morally, if not legally.

Not agreeing with either Riel or his counsel, the jury found him guilty. A zealot like Riel might well be found insane in a twentieth-century court, but the then prevailing "McNaghten Rules" defined insanity narrowly. To
be acquitted, an accused had to be "labouring under such a defect of reason, from disease of the mind, as not to know the nature and quality of the act he was doing, or, if he did know it, that he did not know he was doing what was wrong." This test left little room for defining Riel's state of religious exaltation as legal insanity, regardless of what doctors might call it.

After the jury's verdict, Richardson had no choice but to sentence Riel to hang. Appeals ran to the Manitoba Court of Queen's Bench in Winnipeg and to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, but the higher courts left the verdict and sentence undisturbed. The federal cabinet, however, still had the power to advise the Governor General to exercise the royal prerogative of mercy and commute Riel's sentence. In a discreditable episode, Prime Minister Macdonald sent two doctors on a secret mission to Regina to form an opinion about Riel's sanity. When the two could not agree, Macdonald suppressed their reports and urged his cabinet colleagues to let Riel hang. They finally agreed, though not without considerable soul-searching by the Quebec ministers.

Riel was hanged early on the morning of November 16, 1885. As Father André intoned the Lord's Prayer, the trap dropped on the phrase "deliver us from evil," and Riel's life was over. Throughout his imprisonment, he had wrestled with his sense of mission. After being condemned to death, he signed an abjuration of his mission and re-entered the Church, but his renunciation was only superficial. He continued to receive revelations and to write extensively about his mission. He told Doctor Jukes, the NWMP physician at Regina, that he would be resurrected like Christ on the third day after his death, which may help to explain the conspicuous courage with which he went to the gallows.

**Conclusion**

Louis Riel was a man of extraordinary talents. Well educated by the standards of his own or any time, he could write and speak French eloquently and English adequately. His magnetism and determination could move men to action against great odds. He may not be the greatest figure in Canadian history, but he is probably the most memorable. He is also the most controversial, and it would be silly to pretend that there is consensus about the significance of his career. An author can only state his own views and urge the reader to compare them against the evidence.

As I see it, the results of Riel's leadership were tragic for himself and disastrous for the Metis. The Resistance of 1869-70 forced a confrontation where none was necessary, for Canada had no intention of depriving the
Metis of their rights and property. The Resistance led to the premature creation of an undersized province of Manitoba, deprived of control over its natural resources and without sufficient revenue to sustain itself. The needless execution of Thomas Scott created a backlash against the Metis by confirming the worst prejudices of English Canadians, and thus Riel’s victory of 1870 proved short-lived.

The North-West Rebellion, launched when the grievances of the Metis were on the verge of resolution, was a second terrible mistake. By leading the Metis into another unnecessary fight, one they could not hope to win, Riel accelerated their dispersion and disintegration as a people. But by this point in his life, he was so bound up in his inner visions and revelations that he was detached from such realities of ordinary politics.

None of this is to say that everything was Riel’s fault, or that others were without fault. There is blame enough for everyone in this sad story. It is simply to state that, measured by the pragmatic test of results, Riel’s leadership was a failure.

Beyond fact and sober evaluation, however, there is a realm of symbolic history, where Riel’s image has assumed gigantic proportions. For decades, he was an icon of French-Canadian nationalists in Quebec, who regarded the Metis as a western extension of the French fact. In so doing, they chose to overlook Riel’s disillusionment with Quebec politicians, his break with the Catholic Church, and his vision of a prairie Metis mosaic formed by marriages between native people and European immigrants of many nations.

Since the 1970’s, Riel has become the symbol of the modern Metis, most of whom are neither French nor Catholic. He is perceived as a token of indigenous national liberation, of aboriginal rejection of white (“Euro-Canadian”) civilization. This version of his identity overlooks his reactionary political views, his Ultramontane Catholicism, and his mission as “Prophet of the New World.”

These and other images of Riel will continue to play a role in Canadian politics. Yet the historian’s aim should be to recover the past in its original context, as the great German historian Leopold von Ranke said, *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* (as it actually was). The scholar’s task is to discover human beings, not to create, debunk, or venerate icons. Only by such historical analysis can Canadians come to appreciate the pathos and tragedy of Riel’s life and of Metis history.
SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

The literature on Louis Riel, the Metis people, and the two uprisings is so large and diverse that only some of the best-known titles can be mentioned here. The interested reader will find in these works many references to other scholarly books, articles, and theses. Good brief introductions to Riel’s life are Hartwell Bowsfield, Louis Riel: The Rebel and the Hero (Toronto, 1971); and Lewis H. Thomas’ article on Riel in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 11 (Toronto, 1982), pp. 736-52. School-age readers should refer to Thomas Flanagan and Claude Rocan, Rebellion in the North-West: Louis Riel and the Metis People (Toronto, 1984). Two good general histories are W.L. Morton, Manitoba: A History 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1967); and Gerald Friesen, The Canadian Prairies: A History (Toronto, 1987). Useful background on Red River and the fur trade will be found in Frits Pannekoek, The Fur Trade and Western Canadian Society, 1670-1870 (Ottawa, 1987) Canadian Historical Association Booklet No. 43.


Stanley’s Louis Riel (Toronto, 1963) is the most authoritative general biography, but it should be complemented by Thomas Flanagan, Louis ‘David’ Riel: ‘Prophet of the New World’ (Toronto, 1979); and Gilles Martel, Le messianisme de Louis Riel (Waterloo, Ont., 1984) for a view of Riel’s religious beliefs. Joseph Kinsey Howard, The Strange Empire of Louis Riel (New York, 1952) is gripping, but inaccurate in many details. Riel’s trial and death are covered in Thomas Flanagan, Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered (Saskatoon, 1983). Desmond Morton edited and published the trial transcript as The Queen v Louis Riel (Toronto, 1974).

Stanley’s The Birth of Western Canada (Toronto, 1961 [1936]) is still indispensable for an overall view of the two uprisings. William A. Oppen,
The Riel Rebellions: A Cartographic History (Toronto, 1979) contains a useful collection of maps. On the Manitoba events, W.L. Morton, ed., Alexander Begg's Red River Journal (Toronto, 1956) is valuable for the editor’s introduction as well as for the documents it contains. For the North-West Rebellion, see particularly Bob Beal and Rod Macleod, Prairie Fire: The 1885 North-West Rebellion (Edmonton, 1984); Flanagan, Riel and the Rebellion; George Woodcock, Gabriel Dumont: The Metis Chief and His Lost World (Edmonton, 1975); and Hugh Dempsey, Big Bear (Vancouver, 1984). Particularly to be avoided because of its unproven theory that Sir John A. Macdonald and other white conspirators deliberately provoked the Rebellion is Don McLean, 1885: Metis Rebellion or Government Conspiracy (Regina, 1985). Also questionable is D.N. Sprague, Canada and the Metis, 1869-1885 (Waterloo, Ont., 1988). It contains some information on Metis land claims in Manitoba that the reader will not find elsewhere, but its approach is partisan and tendentious.

Three works will be of particular interest to military historians. Stanley, Toil and Trouble: Military Expeditions to Red River (Toronto, 1989), tells the story of all military expeditions to Red River from 1816 to 1872. Desmond Morton, The Last War Drum (Toronto, 1972), covers all the military aspects of the North-West Rebellion. Walter Hildebrandt, The Battle of Batoche: British Small Warfare and the Entrenched Metis (Ottawa, 1985), is outstanding on its more restricted subject.

Although there is a good deal of contemporary research, no one has yet written a comprehensive history of the Metis people to replace Marcel Giraud, The Métis in the Canadian West, 2 vols. (Edmonton, 1986), first published in 1945 as Le Métis canadien. A new general history would be desirable because Giraud’s book, although a monument of scholarship, employs racial explanations that are no longer accepted. Donald Purich, The Metis (Toronto, 1988), is a useful short overview. Diane Payment has written a history of the Metis community of Batoche, “The Free People — Otipemisiwak”: Batoche, Saskatchewan 1870-1930 (Ottawa, 1990). An earlier and less complete French version of the same book is Payment, Batoche (1870-1910) (St. Boniface, 1983).