

# The Absent Protagonist

## Louis Riel in Nineteenth-Century Canadian Literature

Que suis-je pour essayer à mener les événements?

Un néant, c'est moi.

Louis Riel (1884)

The response of Canadian writers to Louis Riel at the end of the nineteenth century, like that of politicians and the populace at large, was generally divided along ethnolinguistic lines. Anglophones tended to perceive the Métis leader as a rebel and a despot, a “traitor” to the Crown. Francophones, on the other hand, usually saw him as a victim of Anglo-Saxon bigotry, someone who was hanged precisely because of his Frenchness. However, when one examines closely the two sets of representations, one realizes that they have much more in common than one might expect. As I will attempt to demonstrate in this essay, neither English-speaking nor French-speaking Canadian writers really acknowledge Riel’s Otherness, his national specificity as a Métis. Notwithstanding their significant ideological differences, the two groups have a tendency to turn examinations of the two North-West conflicts into tracts on the perpetual Canadian question, the relationship between Quebec and the rest of the country. Consequently, even in works that purport to be about the so-called Prophet of the New World, he is often virtually absent. In the words of the Quebec sociologist Gilles Martel, when it comes to Riel, both French and English Canada are unable to transcend their “querelles ethnocentriques” and accept that the Métis leader’s story is not their own but “le drame d’une *autre* collectivité” (155).

My primary objective here is not to endeavour to prove that it is impossible for a writer to represent members of another ethnocultural group. As Robert Young notes in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, the idea that one can only know the Other “through a necessarily false representation” is problematic, since it underestimates the degree of “commerce”

among cultures. As Young asserts, today's foremost models of cultural interaction "often stress separateness, passing by altogether the process of acculturation whereby groups are modified through intercultural exchange and socialization with other groups" (4-5). The inadequacy of these theories is particularly evident in relation to Riel and the Métis, a people whose hybridity not only defines its collective identity but supposedly makes its name "agréable à tout le monde, parce qu'il n'est pas exclusif" (Riel II 120). Of all First Nations (or partly First Nations) in Canada, the Métis certainly have the greatest kinship with the dominant Euro-Canadian society, both culturally and biologically. After all, not only did Riel receive basically all his formal education from Catholic priests but he was also seven-eighths white. As he proudly asserts, "presque tout mon sang vient de la France" (II 72). But, as mentioned above, the central aim of this paper is not to elucidate the reasons both French- and English-speaking Canadian writers are unable to capture the social and psychological reality of an individual with whom they (especially the former) have many biocultural affinities. Rather, it is to explore how those authors systematically fail to address Riel's national separateness, the fact that he does not claim affiliation with their communities but with a distinct and, at times, adversarial polity.

Riel's impact on the Canadian consciousness was almost instantaneous. The first literary work on the politician-mystic, depicting him as an enemy of Confederation, appeared the very winter he 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 poem threatening to recapture Red River's economic and administrative centre. To quote the two-verse "The Marching Song":

Riel sits in his chamber o' state  
 Wi' his stolen silver forks an' his stolen silver plate,  
 An' a' his braw things spread out in style so great;  
 He'll not breakfast alone this morning.

O Hey, Riel, are ye wakin' yet,  
 Or are yer drums a-beatin' yet?  
 If y're nae wakin' we'll nae wait,  
 For we'll take the fort this morning. (1870b, 50)

Later that year the Scottish-born author would add several more stanzas to his work and rename it "Capture of Fort Garry, or Riel's Retreat," and further lambaste the Métis and their "President elate" for being not just rebels but also cowards. To quote Murray again, the moment Riel and his people sensed

that the Canadian soldiers were approaching the Settlement, they sank “intae the groun’, or vanished i’ the air, / Like Macbeth’s weird sisters” (58-59).

Considerably more influential than either version of Murray’s poem was the 1885 novel by J. Edmund Collins, *The Story of Louis Riel the Rebel Chief*. Published anonymously while the Saskatchewan campaign raged, Collins’s work possesses little aesthetic merit. The author himself subsequently declared that the reason he did not append his name to the text was that he was “unwilling to take responsibility for the literary slovenliness” (*Annette* 143). Yet, despite its myriad shortcomings, *The Story of Louis Riel* is pivotal in the evolution of Riel’s image in Canadian culture. Although 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” (Adams 5-7). Collins was especially close to the “Confederation” poets Archibald Lampman and Charles G.D. Roberts, the first of whom considered him “almost the literary father” of a new generation of writers and the second of whom would continue to communicate with him even after the Newfoundlander’s death—through an Ouija board (Lampman 40; Pomeroy 85). Indeed, Collins’s novel is believed to reflect 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 Canada, during the later Riel years (Lamb 343).

The most remarkable aspect of *The Story of Louis Riel* is its idiosyncratic treatment of the relationship between Riel and Tom Scott, the controversial Ontario Orangeman executed by the Métis provisional government at Red River. As portrayed by Collins, the conflict between Riel and Scott is not religious or cultural but romantic; both men fall in love with the same woman, a beautiful young Métisse named Marie who loves Tennyson, talks to birds, and, inadvertently, precipitates the troubles of 1869-70. Like “Mohammed, El Mahdi, and other great patrons of race and religion,” Riel has a strong will but is “weaker than a shorn Samson” when facing an attractive woman. So, although the Métis leader purportedly already “rejoices in the possession of three wives,” he is immediately smitten by the dark-haired beauty when he happens to overhear Marie singing in the middle of the prairie (*The Story* 49, 131). Later, upon learning that Marie does not return his affections because she is deeply in love with Scott, Riel decides to eliminate

his rival. In fact, Riel not only frames “the mischievous, manly, sunny-hearted lad” from Ontario but, during his archenemy’s show-trial, conveniently absents himself from the court in order not to be held accountable for the proceedings by either justice or history (*The Story* 56, 108-16).

A year later, after the fall of Batoche, Collins devoted another novel to the Métis leader, *Annette, the Metis Spy: A Hero of the N.W. Rebellion*. There are extensive similarities between the two works, whole sections of the second being simply lifted from the first. As Collins justifies his strategy, the “most notable authors have done this sort of thing; and chief amongst them I may mention Thackeray” (*Annette* 142). The most interesting element in *Annette* is its short epilogue, which is not only “one of the gems of early Canadian literature” (McCourt 15), but also one of the truly curious texts in the theory of historical fiction. Unencumbered by the usually thorny relation between documentation and invention, Collins declares 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 the fiction” (*Annette* 142). As he states:

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 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. (*Annette* 142)

Concerning *The Story of Louis Riel*, which was accepted as historically factual until the 1970s (Swainson 14), Collins adds that his first novel “has been quoted as history; but it is largely fiction.” He particularly stresses that 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 white man. I have seen the story printed again and again as truth; but there is in it not a word of truth” (*Annette* 142-43).

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, let alone a co-citizen. Still, Riel is central to both of his novels. While the originator of the 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 United States President James Garfield by another self-declared political 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 (*The Story* 96, 47). 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 be given a proper Christian burial, is somehow able to escape “the vengeance of the law” (*The Story* 119, 125). In short, for Collins, Riel is a satanic force that has infiltrated his world and that the author is unable to evade.

Collins’s works on Riel, however, are quite atypical. The Métis leader does not enjoy the prominence he has in the Newfoundlander’s novels in too many other early texts dealing with the events of 1869-70 or 1885 (Owram 317). For example, Riel does not even figure as a character in two contemporaneous plays about the latter conflict, George Broughall’s *The 90th on Active Service or, Campaigning in the North West* and L. Dixon’s *Halifax to the Saskatchewan: “Our Boys” in the Riel Rebellion*. Written by soldiers, the two burlesque dramas focus almost exclusively on military concerns, notably the alleged mistreatment of the volunteers. The grievances of the troops in both works are not so much against Riel and his “breeds” as against their own inconsiderate officers and the haughty media. To quote a foreign-born soldier, “Sometimes, mine friends, and this is true, / One meal a day was all we get” (Dixon 20-21). 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 marginal role in the numerous poems elicited by the North-West Rebellion. There are exceptions, of course, such as Cleomati’s “To One of the Absent.” 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 the words that the poet addresses to her “darling” fighting “poor Scott’s heartless murderer” (63):

Let justice be done now unailing  
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 sturdy settler's breast. (64)

Most other works on the subject, however, 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, "The Charge" 70; DeGuise 16). Those selfless young men ought to be celebrated, the poets aver, 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." It is only fitting that "the tears of a nation" be shed for the soldiers, since it was those "vaillants enfants, grandis dans les alarmes," who proved to Canada that the "sang de tes aïeux gonfle encor [sic] tes artères" (Wetherald 538; Desaulniers 13).

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" (282). But that is not quite the impression one gets from the writings produced at the time. Particularly after Riel's defeat at Batoche, 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 Crawford writes in "The Rose of a Nation's Thanks,"

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 tread 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! ("The Rose" 45-6)

Or, as she affirms in "Songs for the Soldiers," "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" ("Songs" 70-71).

Virtually the only writer who examines the events of 1885 from a First Nations perspective is Pauline Johnson. In “A Cry from an Indian Wife,” 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 that most critical question in the relations between the First Nations and Europeans in the New World, land ownership. For the poet, the “white-faced warriors” are not the heroic defenders of the motherland but intruders into foreign territory, invaders who march “west to quell / Our fallen tribe that rises to rebel.” Therefore, rather bidding them welcome, she bewails their presence, cursing “the fate that brought them from the east / To be our chiefs—to make our nation least.” Significantly, while Johnson focuses on the brave “Indian scout” for whose “vict’ry” no one prays and his loyal “Indian wife” with her equally “wild, aching breast,” she does not say a word about the Métis, much less about their discredited former leader.

Riel is even more conspicuously absent in Ernest Henham’s *Menotah: A Tale of the Riel Rebellion* but for more sinister reasons. Sir John A. Macdonald may have considered the politician-mystic “a clever fellow” and “the moving spirit” behind the two North-West conflicts, even suggesting that he be recruited “as an officer” by Canada’s new national police force (408). For Henham, on the other hand, Riel could never have been anything other than a nonentity. By virtue of his mixed racial heritage, Riel was born not to lead but to be led—by one of his “purer” European cousins. As the author notes in his preface, he elects not to portray the Métis leader as “an active character” in his novel because Riel was “a French half-breed of the ordinary stamp,” very much like his “dull-witted, heavy-featured and obtuse” brother who still lives along the Red River. The architect of that “hopeless [Saskatchewan] enterprise” is “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).

Henham, a British-born writer about whom not much is known except that he wrote other romances about the Canadian West, proceeds to depict Riel merely as the “nominal leader” of the Métis-First Nations insurrection. Its real commander is a fabled (and fictitious) young Canadian sharpshooter named Hugh Lamont “who disguises himself as ‘blood Indian’” (270). As Henham has an old Métis hunter named Billy Sinclair explain, Lamont is the third party behind the “nickle[sic]-plate plot” and his alleged plan “to stamp the whole crowd of whites clean out of the land,” the mysterious figure

“who’s supplying the brains to run this rebellion, and all the rest of it” (12-13). To quote Sinclair, “Riel was *not*, never had been, the prime factor of the revolution.” Hopelessly irresolute, “he was powerless to act as a sole leader” and “in all things he was guided by the cunning brain and persuasive voice of his white subordinate” (11, 270). That is, Riel is less a rebel or traitor than one of the great frauds of all time. Confederation’s “nemesis” turns out to be such a dunce that there is little justification for including him in works about the two watershed events in Canadian history with which his name is so indelibly associated.

Not surprisingly, the nineteenth-century representations of Riel in French are noticeably different from those in English, usually portraying him not as a renegade but as a martyr. Here, too, the first work on the subject 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 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 poet laureate and “gardien spirituel” of its “âme nationale” (Roy 9), 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 cœur 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.” So gentle is Riel’s nature that it becomes obvious that the efforts to demonize him and to “déifier” Scott are not really about the two men (207-08). 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 traite  
Expire sur la croix, ô secte fanatique,  
Comme son Christ au Golgotha! (208-09)

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 apparently provoked such a storm of controversy in the English-speaking media that Louis Fréchette wondered if one might not "prendre à la même corde Riel et son poète" ("Pamphile" 181). Years later, in 1885, Fréchette himself would contribute what is arguably the most celebrated work on Riel as a victim of Anglo-Canadian chauvinism, *Le dernier des martyrs* (1885-86). 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 not "[l]e dernier des martyrs" but "le plus récent" for the "opresseurs se sont toujours trompés: le sang / Des héros en produit infailliblement d'autres" (3). In fact, the poem's central message seems to be 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 Châtiment!" (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 unforgivable, since the objects of their venom are a most amiable and industrious group. As he writes, the Métis are a "brave petit peuple" that courageously "avait planté sa tente / Au désert." They are "paysans, sans fusils, sans canons" (8, 4-5).

Despite the affability of the Métis and 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 (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 démençce;  
 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! (6)

Or, as the poet makes even more explicit when he revises the work for his collection *La légende d'un peuple* (1889), “A mort! à mort! il a du sang français aux veines! / A voilà son vrai crime” (287).

Fréchette does at times acknowledge the national specificity of the Métis. For instance, in a footnote to a segment of the revised version of the poem in *La légende d'un peuple*, the author states that, although the “Métis du Nord-Ouest. . . sont des descendants de Français unis à des Indiennes,” they “forment une race à part” (343). 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 refers to “notre peuple asservi,” “notre foi sainte” and “nos enfants, fiers, libres et français” makes it 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’aïnesse et par droit de conquête” (*Le Dernier* 3-4).

The understanding that Riel’s hanging is merely an extension of Quebec’s seemingly endless struggle in Confederation, especially 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*. Also known as “La Marseillaise rielliste” (Vaugois and Lacoursière 441), 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 36). To quote the opening 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 n.p.)

Or, as the poet adds in a refrain with a distinctively Riellian touch,  
“Courage! Canadiens! Tenons bien haut nos cœurs, / Un jour viendra (*bis*)  
Nous serons les vainqueurs” (Anonymous 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, *À la mémoire* 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 Judases who have “vendu vos 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 ostensibly about the leader of the two North-West conflicts, there is not a single reference to the Métis people. Thus, 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 n.p.).

The centrality of Quebec is also unmistakable in two poems that Rémi Tremblay devotes to Riel. “Une épopée” 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,” in which young Quebecers 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 writes 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” (“Une épopée” 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*) ("Une épopée" 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*) ("Une épopée" 147)

Unlike the heroic volunteers of much English-Canadian poetry, who for "kindred and country's sake" intrepidly face the "Half-breed hell-hounds" (Campbell 267; Mulvaney 74), Tremblay's "beaux militaires" make sure that the enemy stronghold has been abandoned before they venture into the village. To quote one of the prudent warriors, "Prenons donc Batoche: / Ces gueux de Métis (*bis*) / En sont tous partis" ("Une épopée" 146, 148).

Tremblay's other Riel poem, "Aux chevaliers du nœud coulant," is more characteristic 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 (70). A work of "une rare violence," Tremblay's poem presents all francophone 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 vil métal," which is their "suprême loi!" Typically, 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 Riders of the Plains but the greater French-speaking community in North America (Blais, "Coups d'aile" 158; Tremblay, "Aux Chevaliers" 70-71).

There is 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). Lemay, who is himself a Métis, 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 politician-mystic is not just a victim of perfidy, but has been betrayed by his own kind. Riel has been sold by "les 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'" (566). Still, Lemay's Riel remains incontestably Métis. As the martyr from Saint Boniface posthumously evaluates his own 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. (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" ("Chant du Métis" 567).

Lemay's poem, however, is very much an exception. Riel's identity as Métis is again subsumed into the Quebec-dominated world in two plays—both entitled *Riel*—published in response to the Métis leader's fate after the fall of Batoche. Written by two French immigrants, Charles Bayer and E. Parage, the first play is an extremely convoluted and tendentious political melodrama. For example, the leading anglophone character, the Canadian government's commissioner in the North-West, is surnamed MacKnavel. On the other hand, the visiting Franco-American journalist who wins the heroine's heart bears the family moniker of Francoeur. As well, while the playwrights may consider Riel "le glorieux martyr canadien" (66), they seem much more captivated by the romance between Francoeur and his Canadian love interest and do not even deign to include the Métis leader in the last act.

The second play, by the Quebec medical doctor Elzéar Paquin, is equally equivocal about its eponymous protagonist, and factional. In its stage directions, it describes Scott as "le bandit" and Riel as "le grand Patriote martyr" (n.p.), an "HÉROS POLITIQUE" whose sentence at Regina was nothing

less than a “MEURTRE JUDICIAIRE” (93). Yet the play then proceeds to explore the impact of Riel’s death not on the Métis people but on Quebec. Paquin’s work actually ends with a long discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of Quebec’s “annexion” to the United States, an economic and political union which the author clearly favours. In the utopian words with which he has a character close 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” (142-43).

In conclusion, the relative absence of Riel from works purportedly about him is curious for a series of reasons. To begin with, his peripheral existence appears to reflect a certain ambivalence, if not outright chauvinism, toward the politician-mystic and his people. For someone like Henham, Riel cannot be the leader of the anti-Canadian forces in 1885 because of his mixed race. The celebrated cartoonist and satirist J.W. Bengough, although without necessarily subscribing to Henham’s blatant racism, is also convinced that Riel was not the architect of the Batoche campaign. The creator of some of the most memorable images from the Confederation period, and admittedly not an admirer of the Métis leader, Bengough writes that the execution of “the ill-starred Half-breed” does not put an end to the North-West Rebellion. For “Riel was but an incident of the rebellion; justice will not be satisfied until the actual authors of it are exposed and punished, whether those turn out to be plotting speculators at Prince Albert or drowsy ministers at Ottawa” (“Cartoon” n.p.). Wilfrid Laurier, in contrast, contends that Riel was not responsible for his actions, by reason of insanity. Laurier may have made the famous statement that, had “I been born on the banks of the Saskatchewan”—which Riel was not—“I would myself have shouldered a musket to fight against the neglect of governments and the shameless greed of speculators.” At the same time, the country’s first French-speaking prime minister also makes it unequivocally clear that he does not consider the Métis leader a hero. To quote Laurier, “Nature had endowed [Riel] with many brilliant qualities,” but it “denied him a well-balanced mind. . . . [T]hat he was insane appears to me beyond the possibility of controversy” (qtd. in Skelton 314, 322). Indeed, one of the great ironies about Riel is that it is his supporters who argue most passionately that he is mentally unbalanced, while his enemies—including the federal government—strive to demonstrate that he is perfectly sane (*Queen* 205-15).

However, both Riel’s allies and his adversaries—that is, both French and English Canada—are quite uncertain about his national status, an ambivalence

manifested in the history of his cultural reception. Within a few years of his hanging, the Métis leader virtually disappears from the consciousness of both communities (Owram 316-17), suggesting that neither one truly perceived him as one of its own. Interestingly, when Riel 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. Of course, the post-World War II Riel is radically different from the ethnoreligious martyr of the end of the nineteenth century. The new Riel is taken outside not only the Catholic-Protestant prism but also the Quebec-Ontario one. As Rudy Wiebe has the Métis bard Pierre Falcon state at the end of *The Scorched-Wood People*, “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” (351). Riel, in fact, has undergone such a metamorphosis in the last fifty years that he has been transformed into nothing less than a Canadian icon, an ancestor. Through a process that Laura Murray, in a different context, terms the “aesthetic of dispossession” (207), Euro-Canadian writers have turned the one-time rebel into the ultimate mediator, “the half-caste / neither white nor brown” who stands among the country’s various racial, cultural, linguistic, and regional groups and perhaps can bring about their unity (Livesay 151).

In spite of his increasingly positive image in Canadian culture, the new Riel still bears a surprising resemblance to his earlier incarnations—his frequent absence from narratives supposedly about himself. In order to convert Riel into a Canadian hero, contemporary writers are often forced both to denationalize and sanitize him, de-emphasizing particularly his Catholicism and his Frenchness. Even in a long narrative like Wiebe’s novel one tends to encounter a rather one-dimensional characterization of the man who saw himself as the David of the New World. One certainly finds in it little trace of the Riel who asserts that Catholicism is “la seule foi vraie une” and that “Jésus Christ Notre Dieu défend à tout catholique d’épouser aucune personne protestante” (III, 258; II, 152); the Riel who claims to be a royal pretender to the French throne, being “un des princes descendants de Louis XI” (III, 209); and, above all, the Riel who declares that Canada is the mortal enemy of the Métis people, “notre injuste agresseur,” and Confederation “une fraude immense, une tyrannie colossale” (I 416; II 299). That is, in an attempt to claim the Métis leader as their own, contemporary Canadian writers efface him by denying him his story. Or, to phrase it differently, even today Riel remains the absent protagonist.

## NOTES

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