

## **Canada and the Métis, 1869-1885**

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## Chapter 1

# Historiographical Introduction

“Rebellions” of native peoples disturbed Canadian history in 1869 and again in 1885. Neither encounter involved a massive number of “rebels,” and both tended to be identified with a single person. In the first “Riel rebellion,” Louis Riel probably had no more than 700 active adherents. In the second, the number of Métis taking up arms was less than 400. Not surprisingly, neither event was significant by the number of casualties. Only a few people died in the first instance; about fifty were killed on each side in the second conflict with Canada. Still, few historians would quarrel with the assertion that the Red River Resistance of 1869-70 and the North West Rebellion of 1885 had profound significance for the country as a whole because Canadians have debated heatedly and persistently the rights and wrongs of the roles played by the various participants for more than a century.

In the first frankly polemical accounts,<sup>1</sup> the most salient theme was the struggle of “civilization” against “barbarism” because the rebels in each case were the “natives” of a newly acquired country. An aggressive but compassionate New Dominion had defeated “semi-savage” obstacles to progress. And since the defeat of the Métis represented a conquest of persons whose language was French and religion was Roman Catholicism, the victory was a triumph for English-Protestant ascendancy at the same time. But so long as the French-Catholic minority in the rest of the country was not similarly vanquished, it would be impossible to achieve a “Canadian” consensus on the larger significance of the two “Riel Rebellions.” Several traditions of hagiography and demonology posed conflicting claims to the larger truth.

In addition to the government-vindication tradition suggested above (the story with the New Dominion of Canada in the role of hero, the part of arch-villain played by “Dictator” Riel, and the Roman Catholic missionaries to the Métis falling somewhere in between), there was a French-

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1. See George Bryce, *A Short History of the Canadian People* (London, 1887) or R.G. MacBeth, *Making the Canadian West* (Toronto, 1905).

Canadian version articulated by spokesmen for Canada's largest minority.<sup>2</sup> Here the tendency was to glorify saintly bishops and missionaries for their heroic struggle to "civilize" the Métis and to resist the tide of Orange-Protestant fanaticism emanating from Ontario. In the pro-French polemical tradition, Riel was a demented leader of a flawed but pitiable people. Louis Riel and the "semi-civilized" Métis ranked between the heroic clergy, on the one hand, and the anti-Catholic fanatics in and out of government, on the other hand.

Clearly, the government-vindication and the clerical-beatification polemics did not serve the national pride of the Métis who believed that they had followed neither dictator nor madman. Their version of events—largely a matter of oral tradition—passed from generation to generation in a number of different stories, occasionally surfacing in written petitions, then finally appearing as a comprehensive history published in 1935.<sup>3</sup> The official "history of the Métis Nation" depicted Riel as visionary and martyr. Neither insane nor dictatorial, he operated with foresight and consensus. The clergy were well meaning but cowardly; ultimately their cowardice turned them into betrayers of the cause and prime speculators in Métis land. Still, the clerical sin of cowardice paled beside the treachery of strangers who plotted the destruction of Riel and his people through the power of the state.

Sifting a more comprehensive truth from the competing polemical traditions became the challenge to academic historians in the twentieth century. To George Stanley, what was needed was to establish the good faith of each set of principal actors. His *Birth of Western Canada* (first published in 1936)<sup>4</sup> adopted a tragic stance. While praising the New Dominion for its zealous expansionism (a sign of "nationalism" and "aggressive civilization," both worthy attributes for Stanley), he still expressed sympathy for the frustrations of the clergy and the tragic losses of the Indians and the Métis. The tragedy was their "doom" as a people.

The natives had to fail. They were "primitive peoples" standing against the march of "civilization" (p. 88). At the minimum, they had to be pushed aside to make way for newcomers. The Métis plan to resist Canada in 1869 was absurd. Still, they did not deserve hatred for the attempt. Their one contemptible action in 1869-70 was the "cruel act of bloodshed" in

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2. See D.P. Benoit, *Vie de Monseigneur Taché, archevêque de Saint-Boniface*, 2 vols. (Montreal, 1904); and A.G. Morice, *History of the Catholic Church in Western Canada*, 2 vols. (Toronto, 1910).

3. A.H. de Trémaudan, *Histoire de la Nation Métisse dans l'Ouest canadien* (Montreal, 1935). In English translation (by Elizabeth Maguet), the work is *Hold High Your Heads* (Winnipeg, 1982).

4. The place of publication was London, England. A generation later a Canadian firm acquired the copyright and reprinted the work in a resurrected but unrevised edition (Toronto, 1961).

the matter of Thomas Scott's execution for counter-insurgency. "The charges brought against Scott . . . were hardly offences that demanded the death penalty" (pp. 105-106). And even if Scott did deserve "a form of punishment used only as a last resort in civilized communities," his execution was politically inexpedient. The Métis invited terrible reprisals. Up to March 4, 1870 their resistance had been peaceful, "almost bloodless, but this regrettable event aroused those latent racial and religious passions which have been so deplorable a feature of Canadian history, and left bitter memories that were not soon forgotten" (p. 106).

Stanley's evidence that Canada might have forgiven the Métis for non-violent rebellion was that the Government of Canada continued to follow a process of conciliation through the passage of the Manitoba Act in May; the fatal error of the Scott matter meant that the government had to turn a blind eye to the violence of newcomers entering the new province thirsting for the blood of Scott's murderers. And since the key people of the provisional government had to be denied amnesty for the same reason, no Métis person could lead the government of Manitoba in the first critical years of the province's history.

"Sullen, suspicious and estranged from their [new] white neighbours and by the actions of the Canadians and the non-promulgation of the amnesty, almost immediately many métis began to look for new homes" (p. 179). Ineffectively led in their homeland, they sought a land of second chance west and north on the Saskatchewan River. Unfortunately, they soon discovered that their status as "first settlers in the North West Territories" did not exempt them from the provisions of the Dominion Lands Act (p. 251). Stanley believed Canada was wrong to have disregarded their new claims. "The attempt to impose an unfamiliar, and to the métis, unsatisfactory system of survey, and thus deprive them of their river-frontages and destroy their village community life, invited armed resistance" (p. 255).

No one could be surprised by the displaced Manitobans' retrieval of Louis Riel from exile in 1884. Nor surprised that he, in his turn, decided to follow the "tactics which he had employed in 1869 and 1870" (p. 314). He formed a second provisional government even though the clergy advised against such a move and condemned him for it. Their reaction was too strong, in Stanley's view. "Riel had no intention of fighting the Dominion with arms; it had not been necessary in 1869; it would not be necessary in 1885." Canada would be shocked into a negotiated settlement as before. "But instead of commissioners came troops" (p. 314).

Stanley did not hesitate to proclaim the "justice of the métis case" (p. 251). Canada's disregard of the Saskatchewan land question was clear. "The case against the Government is conclusive" (p. 261). Canada was guilty of "ministerial incompetence, parliamentary indifference, and administrative delay" (p. 244). Officials had committed "serious

blunders" (pp. 260-61) even though Canadian native policy in general was well intentioned, exhibiting "honesty, justice, and good faith"; Canada caused "no wars of extermination or compulsory migrations" (p. 214). In suppressing the rebellion of 1885, Canada's troops did little burning, looting, property damage, or killing. And "reason and conciliation ultimately prevailed" (p. 407).

Such was the first attempt at balanced interpretation. Stanley's curious mix of shallow praise and weak condemnation suggested that his *Birth of Western Canada* was merely the beginning of the larger task of mediation. The work attracted little attention in Canada at the time of publication in 1936. Reviewers tended to pass his conclusions with little criticism and less praise.<sup>5</sup> No one challenged his tortuous sequence: the Métis were determined to win a secure land base and political control over their homeland in 1869-70, showed no interest in land or politics in Manitoba in the 1870s, then became remarkably interested and determined again in Saskatchewan in 1884-85. Stanley attributed the erratic course of events to a certain petulance likely to be encountered in all primitive peoples who "felt that the country was theirs" (pp. 48-49).

The concept of primitivism disturbed a young W.L. Morton, as evidenced in an article (published in 1937) on the development of Red River institutional structures.<sup>6</sup> Without citing Stanley by name, Morton still presented a sharply contrasting analysis. He agreed that the Red River Settlement had become more and more "Indian" by intermarriage from 1820 to 1870, just as he readily conceded that most people in the Red River Settlement were more involved in freighting and the production of plains provisions than with full-time field agriculture. The contrast emerged in Morton's insistence that the settlement's striking backwardness was in government institutions because the Hudson's Bay Company had imposed a "seigniorial despotism" on the colony. The HBC-appointed council was "mild, often benevolent" but in no sense accountable to the residents of the parishes, not until 1869 (pp. 95-96). Then parish representatives united, perhaps not as a single unit (as one English-speaking member of the provisional government asserted) but "the degree of unity was sufficient to give good ground for Riel's attempt to form a united front and present terms to Canada" (p. 98).

What the rebels had done was not entirely well done. The Scott matter

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5. In Stanley's view, *The Birth of Western Canada* (London, 1936) was "largely ignored" at the time of first publication. See his remarkably personal account of the development of the historiography before and since 1936 in his "Last Word on Louis Riel — the Man of Several Faces," in F. Laurie Barron and James B. Waldram, eds., *1885 and After: Native Society in Transition*, (Regina, 1986), pp. 3-22.

6. "The Red River Parish," in R.C. Lodge, ed., *Manitoba Essays*, (Toronto, 1937), pp. 92-105.

in particular was a “fatal blunder” but overall they had acted with “dignity” and true to the “old, proud claim of the Métis to be a ‘new nation’ [they had] mustered a militia and created representative institutions” (pp. 99, 102). When Canada admitted the Red River Settlement to Confederation as Manitoba, “the Dominion recognized rather than created” (p. 105). The question remained: if Manitobans were a well-rooted national people determined to defend their homeland from invasion by what Stanley had called an “almost foreign country” (pp. 48-49), why then was the dispersal of population so sudden and complete after winning a charter for national survival in the Manitoba Act?

Morton kept working on the problem and eventually found all that he cared to know in a two-volume monograph on “the Canadian half-breed” written in Paris by a French ethnographer during the Nazi occupation.<sup>7</sup> According to Marcel Giraud, the Métis were a “mixed-blood” people incapable of responding to their own best interests. Well-intentioned agents of civilization had tried to educate and mould them to greater competence but had failed. The Métis rejection of proper educational and moral instruction resulted in their decline, ruin, and extinction as a people.

Giraud saw nothing dignified or reasonable in their “nation” claim; he saw only vanity and violence. Defiance of Canada invited reprisal; the murder of Scott invited murders in revenge. The proof of Métis inferiority was their inability to fight an effective defence. “The attacks, the violent acts of every kind that were now directed against the Métis . . . aggravated the inherent weaknesses of their nature, of their upbringing and their antecedents, and precipitated the disintegration of their group” (p. 374). The reign of terror that began, paradoxically, with the arrival of troops sent to guarantee an orderly beginning for the new province continued with the arrival of new settlers because Ontarians, “grouped around their Orange Lodge, could commit the worst excesses with impunity” (p. 377). Yet Giraud refused to connect such violence to a larger pattern of denial of rights. Any injustices by the Government of Canada were “unintended” (pp. 381-382). The root cause of the dispersal was the fatal inferiority of the Métis themselves.

According to Giraud, the principal activities of freighting and the production of plains provisions for the Hudson’s Bay Company were “distractions” rather than “occupations”; they were reflections of origin rather than rational adaptations likely to give way to new responses in subsequent historical development. Métis reluctance to take up full-time farming was proof that they were “incapable of understanding any plan of life other

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7. Marcel Giraud, *Le Métis canadien: son rôle dans l'histoire des provinces de l'Ouest*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1945). The work is now available in English: *The Métis in the Canadian West*, translated by George Woodcock, 2 vols. (Edmonton, 1986). Page citations follow the Woodcock translation, vol. 2.

than nomadism.” The few Métis who pretended to be farmers showed they were “incapable of caring for them in a sensible manner” (p. 388). They rapidly ran into debt and many sold their land to clergy hoping to “substitute for these unambitious individuals a race whose qualities were in no way inferior to those of the immigrants of English or Germanic language” (p. 390). It was no surprise to Giraud that the same cycle of agitation and violence followed the exodus to Saskatchewan and “aggravated the causes of the decay from which this people was suffering” (p. 452).

For the Manitoba historian learning to react against the word “primitive” as an interpretive category, the discovery of Marcel Giraud must have been disturbing. What W.L. Morton should have pointed out in his review of “the Canadian half-breed”<sup>8</sup> in 1950 was that Giraud appeared to have done pioneering research in vast arrays of new material without learning to see beyond the literal to the functional meaning of written testimony, a weakness that was particularly evident in Giraud’s use of missionary chronicles and clerical correspondence. Here, for example, was Giraud using Bishop Grandin of Saskatchewan to paint a gloomy prediction of Métis failure for Archbishop Taché of Manitoba: “It will be just the same here — neither worse nor better as at St Boniface. Our poor Métis will leave their lands to strangers and withdraw as far as they can withdraw. They are a people without energy on whom one cannot count” (p. 430). Instead of interpreting the letter as an indication of pedagogical frustration, Giraud cited Grandin’s words for their literal meaning. He did not read the missionary bias. The same point missed Morton’s notice.

“Giraud presents the Métis four square, in all his vivacity, colour and historical significance, depicts the first beginnings of the mixed race, its swift rise to ‘national’ consciousness, its half century of coherent life, and demonstrates the inevitability and pathos of its doom” (pp. 61-62). Thus Morton abandoned his previous celebration of the “autochthonous” people settled in their neat little “white washed houses clustered on the points and bays of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers.”<sup>9</sup> Following Giraud, Morton began to think of the Métis as the misfits of the West, distracted from true civilization by hunting and voyaging, activities that “bound them ineluctably to nomadism and to barbarism.” Their riverfront habitations were just “rude log cabins,” places for keeping their “few possessions, carts, horses, perhaps a few cattle. There they cultivated rudely their potato patches, and tiny fields of grain. But the hunt, the trapline, the ‘free’ fur trade, drew them seasonally away” (p. 65). They clung stubbornly to their “primitive barbarism” and followed the “easier course” away from field agriculture

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8. In *The Beaver* (September 1950), pp. 3-7; reprinted in A.B. McKillop, ed., *Contexts of Canada's Past: Selected Essays of W.L. Morton* (Toronto, 1980), pp. 61-68. Page citations follow the McKillop edition.

9. Morton, “Red River Parish,” p. 89.

to the end of the wandering life, defeat, and the scaffold at Regina (pp. 62-63). If the Métis were victimized, they were willing victims, defeated finally by their own defects of character. "It was their tragedy that the instability and violence of Riel, reflecting the inherent instability and ready violence of his own uncertain people, ruined his achievement and destroyed his nation" (p. 67).

Six years later Morton was still endorsing Giraud's "magnificent study" but managed to cling to a fragment of his earlier denial of Red River primitivism. His history of the Red River "resistance,"<sup>10</sup> published in 1956 (and his general history of Manitoba<sup>11</sup> which appeared one year later), suggested that the nomadic Métis rebelled in 1869 not because they resisted learning the ways of a settled agricultural existence — not from an irrational defence of their alleged primitivism — but because they preferred instruction by French-speaking, Roman Catholic newcomers. "What the Métis chiefly feared in 1869 was not the entrance of the agricultural frontier of Ontario into Red River — and they would have welcomed that of Quebec — but the sudden influx of immigrants of English speech and Protestant faith" (p. 2). Riel recognized that "their evolution away from nomadism was incomplete" and feared that his people would be overwhelmed by the "inrush of British Canadian land-seekers from Ontario before the *métis* had finally abandoned the wandering life of hunters and tripmen and settled down as farmers in the parishes of the Red and Assiniboine" (p. 5). They strove to protect the stake of each individual to his rude private plot by protecting the French-Catholic character of the group as a whole.

It was the second more ambitious goal that brought them into conflict with Canada. Morton believed that "the Canadian government was entirely ready to grant the normal rights of British subjects to all civilized individuals in the North-West, without respect to race. But it had no idea that it was dealing with a corporate entity, a 'nation' by sentiment and by their own claim" (p. 3). And since the demand for "corporate rights" was considerably more than Canada was prepared to concede, the government naturally resisted. Included in the description of Canada's counter-resistance was Morton's disclosure that Donald A. Smith (the ranking Canadian officer of the Hudson's Bay Company recruited by the government in Montreal to travel to Red River in December 1869) accepted a mission of subversion more than conciliation: "the general purpose of his activities was clearly to create an anti-Riel party amongst the English and *métis* by the use of the influence of the Hudson's Bay Company, and by bribes" (p. 89). Morton

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10. The term "resistance" appeared as Morton's own new label in his book-length editor's introduction to *Alexander Begg's Red River Journal and Other Papers Relative to the Red River Resistance of 1869-70* (Toronto, 1956).

11. *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto, 1957).

did not suggest that such a step disqualified the good faith expressed in the documents that Smith carried to conceal the covert mission. Morton's criticism was that the "game" was "tortuous and difficult," too much for one person to "play against the wary and entrenched Riel" (p. 84).

The "design" failed in its principal objective, and that failure led to the abortive counter-insurgency that culminated in Thomas Scott's death in March 1870. Morton suggested that the killing of Scott was "difficult to explain" because another counter-insurgent had been similarly tried and condemned but set free. William Gaddy had been captured, imprisoned, court-martialled, and ordered executed, then he disappeared. "The rumour was subsequently put about that he had been shot; but actually he had been led by a firing party away from the fort, and at the last moment released and told to leave the country" (p. 103). Morton was puzzled by the different conclusion of the Scott case. In Morton's speculation, Thomas Scott was the object of exceptional treatment because of the extraordinary hatred he and his guards shared for one another. He had to be executed or they would have killed him without the sanction of the provisional government. "The execution of Scott was preferable to his murder" (p. 115). The ceremonious shooting saved the illusion of orderly process, but the alternate form of killing Scott was still a fatal error. Before March 4, 1870 "all might have ended peacefully." After the execution, revenge became a necessary feature of any settlement acceptable to Ontario.

Morton's new version of the story raised a question concerning the Manitoba Act: if the Scott matter determined a vengeful outcome, why did Canada go on with the impression of conciliation, including the concession of the Manitoba Act in May? Here Morton explained that Prime Minister Macdonald was desperate for British participation in a military expedition to impose order, but the Colonial Office was "emphatic" that the Canadians first had to negotiate a settlement acceptable to the "Roman Catholic settlers." Without elaborating the point in detail, Morton asserted that the delegates from Red River "bargained hard" and if they had known "the pressure the Canadian representatives were under from the Colonial office to effect a settlement, would have bargained harder" (p. 135).

Morton's finding that Canada made large concessions to win British military aid and the disclosure that the Smith mission was an exercise in subversion as much as in diplomacy might have led some investigators to search for other signs of duplicity in the pacification of the Métis, especially in accounting for the massive exodus after 1870. But Giraud had given Morton all the reason he needed: the Métis were incurable nomads incapable of accepting agriculture. It was not necessary to ask if the land-promise provisions of the Manitoba Act had been broken along with the assurance of an amnesty. Curiously, though, Morton did present evidence that the government made no effort to control even its own "expedition of

peace.” To the officers and other ranks, “it was an expedition to avenge the murder of Scott.”<sup>12</sup> The violence that followed (the general disorder Giraud had called a “reign of terror”) Morton might have labeled the bleeding Kansas phase of Manitoba history. He recognized that the early expansion of Ontarians was more than a quest for individual plots by land-hungry pioneers. Homesteaders demanded neighbours like themselves. “Whoever possessed the soil would give the new province their language, faith and laws.”<sup>13</sup> So they deliberately took up land that was already occupied, as well as apparently vacant tracts, and were sustained in such trespasses by the Government of Canada. Morton did not inquire if the support of interlopers had been promised in advance, if the Ontario bias was part of a deliberate strategy to assure Ontario’s advantage in the race to determine whether Manitoba would remain a second Quebec. Morton asserted that Canada had done its best to move “with all possible speed to quiet fears and to ensure that the land rush would be peaceful and orderly.”<sup>14</sup> In Morton’s view, there were no serious blunders or intentional injustices in the administration of the Manitoba Act.

Morton’s uncritical stance was taken one step further by Donald Creighton. His award-winning two-volume biography of Sir John A. Macdonald, which amounted to a general history of Canada, was published almost simultaneously with Morton’s work on Manitoba. The nominal focus of the second volume<sup>15</sup> was Macdonald’s prime ministerial career from 1867 to 1891, but the author’s larger purpose was telling the story of the national government as personified in the country’s founder and prototype leader. With such heroic scope, a few thousand Métis might have escaped the notice of another historian, but Creighton devoted several chapters to Macdonald’s interaction with Riel and offered a thorough reinterpretation in the process.

In Creighton’s rendition of the first episode, the story was of a rebellion by “half-breed rioters.” Another country might have responded with force and asked questions later. Canada had to “behave in as patient and conciliatory a fashion as possible.” Smith’s was a straightforward diplomatic mission; and, when diplomacy failed, Riel gave “one final proof of the fact that military power was the one solid and constant basis of his provisional government” (p. 59). He murdered Thomas Scott. Still Canada persisted in the quest for a negotiated settlement because, from one side, Macdonald had to respond to pressure from the British, and, from another more immediate source, powerful pressure for a negotiated settlement came

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12. Morton, *Manitoba*, p. 143.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *John A. Macdonald*; vol. 2, *The Old Chieftain* (Toronto, 1955).

from the important French-Canadian wing of Macdonald's own party. The normally "docile troop" of French-Canadian Conservative supporters were bound to reject any settlement that did not satisfy the "fanatical" priest Riel had sent to Ottawa as his principal negotiator (pp. 62-63). Consequently, when Father Ritchot insisted upon "absurdly premature" provincial status for the Red River Settlement and held out for similarly unreasonable promises with respect to land, language, and schools, his will was done—but as a matter of expediency, for the sake of peace, rather than to strike a blueprint for the future.

Creighton's hostile rendition of the Métis and his unusually sympathetic depiction of Canada's duplicitous response to their demands became even more pronounced in his version of the second rebellion. But since Creighton worked from the perspective of Macdonald's full range of problems, the discussion of Canada's reaction to Métis demands acquired a reality absent from previous accounts. Creighton showed that the nuisance of Riel was tied to the leading preoccupation of the government in 1884-85. "The prime purpose of Canada was to achieve a separate political existence on the North American Continent." That was to be realized by the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), whose "prime function" was "to help in the building of the national economy and the national society which alone would make this ambition possible of achievement" (pp. 301-302).

A first effort to launch the railway had failed in 1873. A new beginning came in 1881 with Canada linking its fortunes to George Stephen, "perhaps the greatest creative genius in the whole history of Canadian finance" (p. 305). But Stephen could not work miracles. Canada had to subsidize the project enormously. Initial grants were "simply the first and most impressive pledges of a partnership which grew tighter and more inextricable with the passage of time" (p. 303). In 1883 and again in 1884 additional aid was demanded and provided. The later rescue "very nearly doubled the subsidy" (p. 376) and taxed Macdonald's powers of persuasion to his limit. Since the second subsidy was "out of all reason and all precedent" (p. 366), Macdonald called on his old friend and cofounder of Canada, Charles Tupper, then on diplomatic service in England. With Tupper temporarily seconded to Ottawa, Macdonald accomplished the great work of saving the railway in February 1884. Then, at the end of the stormy session, Macdonald sought a well-deserved rest at his summer home by the sea. Unfortunately, Macdonald's "summer holidays were no longer real holidays." He sought escape in June, but in July and August the "visitors and mails kept continually arriving. Besides, he wanted them to arrive" (pp. 383-384).

Thus Macdonald learned the disturbing news that "the evil genius of the Red River Rebellion" had returned to the North West in July of 1884 (p. 383). Trouble was brewing. The claims of the Manitoba "half breeds

and the other squatters” had been settled years before in Manitoba (p. 246), but having thrown away their opportunities to speculators, they enjoyed a brief “spree,” drifted west, and renewed the demand for land and cash. As before, they were calling themselves the Métis nation and claiming recognition on that account. “In the settlement process they were a nation of squatters. Macdonald knew, as any lawyer knew, that squatters were notoriously suspicious, impatient, and stubborn people, and that the settlement of their ill-defined claims was probably the most exasperating and difficult problem that could confront a land-granting department” (p. 369). Their complaints were without much substance, of course. “Yet this did not mean that Macdonald considered the matter closed. The half-breed claims could be settled. . . .” Even Riel might be transformed into a loyal client. “The whole issue was a proper subject for compromise” (p. 387).

Then, while still on holiday in August, Macdonald learned the more dreadful truth that Stephen was “far from through his difficulties” (p. 383). The president of the railway began to make “disquieting hints” in August and September that the “enormous aid” voted in February “would not be enough to secure the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway” (p. 389). In the new crisis, Stephen sought British private assistance and persuaded Macdonald to accompany him on the mission to Baring Brothers in Britain. The leisurely crossing gave Stephen ample opportunity to reveal “the deepest urgency of the Canadian Pacific’s necessities” (p. 394). Once in London, Macdonald “began another set of equally lengthy discussions on the same subject with Tupper. Tupper emphatically agreed with him that a final effort to save the railway must be made” (pp. 396-397). The question was one of strategy: “How was he to convince his followers—his own Cabinet—that government aid to the Canadian Pacific was necessary once again?” (p. 396). Creighton found nothing to indicate that either veteran foresaw a suitable combination of enabling circumstances. Not even Macdonald saw a way out of the problem of making additional subsidy politically palatable. He “literally had not the faintest idea. But he had given his word to Stephen” (p. 397).

In the meantime the western crisis had reached new, more dangerous proportions. On the eve of Macdonald’s departure with Stephen, “just before he left Ottawa,” the Prime Minister had received what Creighton called a “most disquieting” report from Saskatchewan (p. 394). The Métis wanted more than their little plots, more even than some token cash in recognition of their imaginary share of Indian title. They were demanding both and two million acres of additional land and a royalty for themselves and the Indians to be paid in perpetuity on all future western development. For himself, Riel claimed a special personal indemnity in compensation for alleged past injuries. Later, with Macdonald and Stephen back in Canada, and the Métis demands still unmet, a more moderately worded petition arrived in December and came before Cabinet as one of the first items

of business in the new year. "It was at this point, when the government expected negotiations and was prepared to make real concessions, that a most disquieting piece of news arrived from the north-west" (p. 413). Government agents had just learned that Riel would bring the entire protest to an abrupt and peaceful conclusion if a certain price were met. "My name is Riel and I want material," were his actual words, they said. "To Macdonald, it was a shattering revelation. It made the whole agitation seem a malevolent sham" (p. 414).

Of course Canada could not give in to blackmail. Nor was Macdonald frightened by the risk of standing on principle in the matter. "Deep in the final privacy of his being, he refused to believe that a single half-breed megalomaniac could destroy the west as a homeland for British Americans or that the track which was to bind Canada together would be permitted to fail for a few million dollars" (p. 415). Then the unexpected happened.

Before informing Riel that the government would never stoop to bribery, Canada took the precaution of informing the Métis that they might take their claims to a special commission which would hear "half-breed claims" in the spring. Wounded by his private disappointment, Riel sought revenge. He persuaded his deluded followers that no one's claim was safe and led everyone who called him leader into rebellion. At that point, according to Creighton, Macdonald stopped wondering what was going to happen, and started acting to make the best of a worsening situation which now included the financial collapse of the CPR. The two emergencies had developed separately yet coincidentally, and "together they might destroy him and his Canada." They had to be resolved separately, but they could be "played off against each other. And in that possibility did not there still lie a real hope? He could use the railway to defend the west. He could use the west to justify the railway" (p. 417).

And so he did. But in the discovery of the dramatic linkage of the railway to the rebellion, a scholar more critical than Creighton might have sought an earlier date for the connection. If the evidence established that Macdonald had linked the one with the other (perhaps as early as his first learning of the new difficulties facing the CPR late in August of 1884), such an investigator would necessarily have sought some intentional provocation in the superficial conciliation of January 1885. And if the evidence suggested that the government was playing a duplicitous game in 1884-85, as well as in 1869-70, the issue of Canadian good faith overall would come into a new perspective. In one form or another, the presumption of benevolence that was such a conspicuous anomaly of the historiography since Stanley's first attempt to balance the three polemical traditions in 1936 would finally have faced a direct challenge.

First one needed to question the fullness of Creighton's answer. Morton did not. He repeated Creighton's version in a history of Canada

published in 1963.<sup>16</sup> Nor did Stanley challenge Creighton in a new biography of Riel which appeared in the same year.<sup>17</sup> The author of *The Birth of Western Canada* continued to sympathize with the tragic fate of the Métis leader and his people, but still did not question the presumption of government good faith. In the next decade, another historian sympathetic to the Métis, Lewis H. Thomas, published an eccentric study of Riel's treason trial and called Riel's execution a "judicial murder."<sup>18</sup> Otherwise the story of Métis-government relations as told by Canadian academics remained as Morton and Creighton had left the subject in the 1950s.

Feeling poorly served by establishment scholars, Métis people began to address the issues for themselves and refined their earlier polemical tradition for current consumption.<sup>19</sup> Only Quebec's new found anti-clericalism and heightened indifference to anything beyond the borders of the *québécois* homeland prevented a revival of the intermediate polemic glorifying the clergy. Since academic historians tend to think they are above "advocacy history," the government-vindication tradition embellished by Morton and Creighton reigned as the objective truth of the early

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16. The full title was *The Kingdom of Canada: A General History from Earliest Times* (Toronto, 1963).

17. The title was simply *Louis Riel* (Toronto, 1963).

18. "A Judicial Murder—The Trial of Louis Riel," in Howard Palmer, ed., *The Settlement of the West* (Calgary, 1977).

19. Howard Adams, *Prison of Grass* (Toronto, 1975) is perhaps the best example of the genre. Other similar works followed from the patronage of the Gabriel Dumont Institute, an educational arm of the Association of Métis and Non-status Indians of Saskatchewan. They supported Martin Schulman's and Don McLean's development of Creighton's link of the railway to the North West Rebellion into a full-blown provocation thesis. See McLean and Schulman, appearing first as "Lawrence Clarke: Architect of Revolt," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 3 (1983), pp. 57-68. McLean later published the same argument in more elaborate form as *1885: Métis Rebellion or Government Conspiracy?* (Winnipeg, 1985). Peripheral to the same trend dating from the late 1970s was the work of D.N. Sprague, which was supported by the Manitoba Métis Federation, examining the administration of the land promises of the Manitoba Act. His "The Manitoba Land Question, 1878-1882" (*Journal of Canadian Studies* 15 [1980], pp. 74-84) and "Government Lawlessness in the Administration of Manitoba Land Claims, 1876-1887" (*Manitoba Law Journal* 10 [1980], pp. 415-441) received more favourable consideration by academic historians. Adams and McLean were called "tendentious" (Stanley, "Last Word," p. 13; and Thomas Flanagan, "Louis Riel: A Review Essay," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 21 [1986], pp. 157-164), while Sprague's argument was considered scholarly if not fully proven (Thomas Flanagan, *Riel and the Rebellion 1885 Reconsidered* [Saskatoon, 1983], p. 26; and Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies* [Toronto, 1984], pp. 197-199). Several historians departing from (yet consistent with) Sprague in their own original research are Gerhard Ens, "Métis Lands in Manitoba, 1870-1887," *Manitoba History* 5 (1983), pp. 2-11; Diane Payment, *Batoche, 1870-1910* (Saint-Boniface, 1983); and Nicole St-Onge, "The Dissolution of a Métis Community: Pointe à Grouette, 1860-1885," *Studies in Political Economy* 18 (1985), pp. 149-172.

1980s. Then a scholarly reconsideration of the issues attracted attention in 1984.

The author of an intellectual biography of Riel and Deputy Editor of the Riel Papers, Thomas Flanagan, announced that there were serious flaws in the “conventional-account” of Canada-Métis relations.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, the “reigning orthodoxy” Flanagan attacked was “Stanley’s version”: the one work of an academic historian writing in English that concluded there were “serious unresolved grievances” driving the Métis to rebellion “after legal means of action had failed” in 1885 (p. viii). Flanagan asserted that “all subsequent historians” had drawn on Stanley’s work. Flanagan appeared to ignore the progression of scholarship away from Stanley, and how his own contribution was completely conventional in that regard.

Flanagan took the story one step beyond Creighton. His “reconsideration” focused exclusively on the Métis in 1885. The crisis in the West did not appear in relation to the crisis with the railway. Nor did the rebellion of 1884-85 relate to the resistance of 1869-70. Flanagan denied that there were any direct links between the first action and the second except in the mind of Louis Riel, who considered the Manitoba Act and the promised amnesty a kind of treaty that left the Métis free to “remove themselves” from Confederation if the bargain were “broken in either of its branches” (p. 83). To Flanagan, no such provision existed in law. Consequently, there could be no legal basis for framing a provisional government a second time even if the promises of 1870 had been disregarded in the 1870s.

Dismissing Riel’s rationale as a legal argument, Flanagan did not pursue its basis in fact. A sketch of the “government’s performance in Manitoba” convinced him that the administration of the Manitoba Act had “left much to be desired.” But, following Morton after Giraud, Thomas Flanagan thought that “the great migration had more to do with social pressure exerted by the white immigrants and the retreat of the buffalo . . .” (p. 26).

As migrants to Saskatchewan, the Métis did come into conflict with government officials. They had to, because they took up land as they pleased in “outright defiance of regulations” (p. 27). No wonder the government was reluctant to consider their claims. Officials were powerless to bend rules for Métis “squatters.” They had to treat them “exactly the same as all other settlers according to legislation and settled policy” (p. 51). And officials treated them well. Flanagan reported that the Department of the Interior had conducted a case-by-case survey in 1884 to determine the precise nature of each claim, what part of the land could be granted as homestead (after the performance of adequate settlement duties), and what

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20. Flanagan, *Riel and the Rebellion 1885 Reconsidered*. Flanagan’s earlier work on Riel was *Louis “David” Riel: “Prophet of the New World”* (Toronto, 1979).

part was open for purchase because of its position in the rectangular survey. Then in 1885 the Métis received written notification of the results — before the rebellion. “Between 26 February and 7 March, a letter was sent to each of the claimants stating the terms on which he could make entry” (p. 47). Flanagan admitted that he was unable to find copies of the letters or other evidence to confirm his assertion that a “reasonable compromise” had settled the river-lot question before the rebellion began (p. 15). But he was positive that “no Métis were forced off their chosen lands” (p. 49).

Another argument developed by assumption and poorly supported assertion accompanied Flanagan’s version of government reaction to the other principal Métis demand: cash compensation for extinguishing their share of Indian title. Flanagan believed that the formation of a “half breed claims commission” announced by telegram on 4 February should have ended agitation on the aboriginal title demand. His explanation for the continuation of protest echoed Creighton’s assertion that Riel made conciliation look like provocation (p. 76). “The cryptic telegram, of which he made himself the interpreter, became evidence of the government’s refusal to deal with the Métis—the exact opposite of its intended meaning” (p. 71). According to Flanagan, Riel had been plotting rebellion “almost from the beginning”:

Riel saw in the grievances of the Métis an opportunity to implement his theory that the Manitoba ‘treaty’ had been broken; that the Métis were the real owners of the North-West; that they could renegotiate entry into Confederation; that they must receive a seventh of the value of the land of the North-West as compensation for letting others live there; and they could seek an independent political destiny if these terms were not met. Collaborating with white agitators like Jackson who were chiefly interested in provincial status and responsible government, he embarked upon a complex and deliberately deceptive strategy of making successively more radical demands. A Bill of Rights amounting to a Declaration of Independence was envisioned almost from the beginning. Finally, when Riel realized there was an unbridgeable gap between himself and Jackson, he determined to go it alone, as he had in 1869. The Métis would take the lead, rise in arms, and carry the English half-breeds and white settlers with them. (pp. 99-100)

Canada had no choice but to deal firmly with the rebel leader after restoring order, but the government did overstep the limits of propriety in resorting to “forgery” of certain medical evidence to hasten Riel’s hanging. According to Flanagan, “This is the one episode in the North West Rebellion in which the government may be accused, not of delays or mistaken judgment, but of bad faith” (p. 145). The rest was excusable. Any other errors were honest mistakes, “not part of a calculated campaign to destroy the Métis or deprive them of their rights” (p. 146).

No academic historian had echoed the official history more faithfully. No one had come closer to providing a complete echo of the “statement of

leading facts'' prepared for the Governor General by the Department of the Interior in April 1885. The key elements of the interpretation were government fairness, on the one hand, and Métis intransigence (misled by Riel), on the other. In the official history, Canada was a helpless victim:

The real causes of the agitation have . . . been beyond the control of the Government. As already pointed out, the half-breeds have asked for nothing reasonable at the hands of the Government which has not been granted to them; and there is indeed no instance in history where the standard of revolt has been raised, and blood been shed, so entirely without justification or provocation.<sup>21</sup>

The development of the historiography from Stanley, through Morton, Giraud, Creighton, and Flanagan would seem to indicate that each fresh version of history is not necessarily closer to full comprehension. On the other hand, if Flanagan's account (so similar to the official government version) were ultimately verified, the more important lesson could be that there is no vision more clear than the sight of the eye-witness. And yet the official history Flanagan embraced did not include his evidence of government forgery of medical evidence for the sake of expediting Riel's execution; nor did it draw Creighton's link of the crisis in the West to that of the East for the sake of the railway, or present either Giraud's documentation of uncontrolled terror in early Manitoba or Morton's story of mock diplomacy in 1869-70. Certain nasty bits had been uncovered by establishment historians since 1936. Are there other indications of duplicity? The question is still open. The question is important because it pertains to the logic of using minimal assumptions in explanation.

The central issue concerns the adoption of government good faith as a working assumption. Reformulators of the conventional account have found suggestions of bad faith, and still assumed that the latest discovery is an exceptional deviation from an overall pattern of benevolent accommodation. For developers of the government-vindication tradition the central problem has been Métis abandonment of opportunities in Manitoba and their blundering into a more perilous confrontation a second time in Saskatchewan. The presumption of government benevolence always calls for supporting assumptions about the Métis: "primitivism" with Stanley, or the assumption of incurable Métis "nomadism" by Giraud and Morton.

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21. Public Archives of Canada (PAC), Sir John A. Macdonald Papers, MG 26 A, Incoming Correspondence, pp. 42338-42348, A.M. Burgess, Deputy Minister of the Interior, to Sir David L. Macpherson, Minister of the Interior. Flanagan came close to admitting that the intent of his book was to turn the historiographical clock back to the government's version of events. A review of his own and other recent work asserted that an "attentive reader will see behind Stanley's analysis the oratory of Edward Blake," the leader of the Liberal Opposition in 1885. Flanagan considered his own book "something of a return to the views of the Conservative government of 1885" ("Louis Riel: Review Essay," p. 158.)

For Creighton and Flanagan, a tertiary presumption has been the political immorality of Riel and the incredible gullibility of his followers. Surely, the more reasonable starting point is suspending both sets of assumptions and asking what is logically the first question: Were the opportunities the Métis allegedly ignored in Manitoba genuine? Or did dispossession precede migration? If the evidence suggests that migration was a rational response to an intolerable situation, the migration would be explicable without resorting to assumptions of Métis non-adaptability. Then, with resettlement in Saskatchewan, the question that would require fewer assumptions than Flanagan's or Creighton's is whether the gestures of alleged conciliation in January and February of 1885 were objectively provocative. Is there evidence of deliberate provocation? If the provocations are not explicable accidents, what could Canada hope to gain by provoking Riel into forming a second provisional government? All such questions suggest that a path of fewer assumptions is possible—and appropriate—for a genuine reconsideration of the evidence.



H.Y. Hind, ca. 1869  
(Provincial Archives of Manitoba)

*“By depicting the Red River Settlement as a parody of proper colonization, Hind was telling his Canadian readers that the real development of the North West was yet to begin.”*