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Louis Riel: Icon of the Left†

THE IMAGE OF LOUIS RIEL began to undergo a profound transformation in English Canada around 1950. Prior to that time he had been seen as an essentially reactionary figure, an obstacle to the expansion of British civilization, both by those who perceived the Métis as similar to Indians and by those who saw them as similar to French Canadians. The former perspective made Riel into a defender of barbarism, the latter into a defender of Catholic "mediaevalism."¹ George Stanley's historical work, which set the Riel rebellions into a broader context of native resistance to the expansion of civilization, softened but did not efface the basic outlines of the prevailing view.²

The change in Riel's image was, broadly speaking, a consequence of the Second World War and its aftermath. The racially inspired atrocities of the Germans and Japanese made racism into the gravest sin of our era, while the dismantling of the European colonial empires and the proclamation by the United Nations of the right of national self-determination called into question many assumptions about the hegemony of Western civilization. As the Third World of former colonies gained its independence, the "Fourth World" of native peoples encapsulated within Western-style states emerged into view.³ The logic of these developments is still unfolding in Canada, as it becomes

increasingly common to use the international vocabulary of "nation" and "sovereignty" to refer to Indians and Métis.⁴ Against this backdrop, views of Riel as a leader of national liberation were bound to arise.

Two authors, the dramatist John Coulter and the journalist-historian Joseph Kinsey Howard, were the first to express the new interpretation of Riel. That Coulter was from Ireland and Howard from the United States probably made it easier for them to create a new mythology about Riel in line with contemporary international currents of thought.

Coulter's first work about Riel was *Riel: A Play in Two Parts* (1950). In 1968 he published two separate and shorter plays, *The Crime of Louis Riel* and *The Trial of Louis Riel*, simpler than the original and more suitable for production. *The Trial*, seen annually by thousands of summer tourists, has become an institution in Regina. In the introduction to *The Crime* Coulter writes:

I see the Métis leader and the rebellions which he led as precursors of later and present uprisings all over the world, particularly the so-called Third World—armed resistance by small nations against forcible take-over by some powerful neighbour, an impassioned rejection of even greatly enhanced material well-being in order to be free—free of the humiliation of paternalistic government by an outsider, free to develop in their own way from their own roots.⁵

At one level Coulter's view of Riel was almost Fenian, portraying him as involved in a world-wide struggle of small peoples against British imperialism, martyred like the poet Padraic Pearse. At another level Coulter's work was deeply involved in Canadian cultural nationalism. He has written of his surprise on learning, upon coming to this country in the 1930s, that Canadian drama was a reflection of foreign models. His first work about Riel reflected a conscious decision to do a "Canadian" play. Mavor Moore, who in 1967 composed the opera *Louis Riel* and who has been an important cultural nationalist, played the leading role in the 1950 production of *Riel*. Coulter also seems to have been the one who suggested to the Massey Commission that Canada should create something like the British Arts Council to patronize the arts. He thus became a sort of godfather to the Canada Council (which incidentally subsidized the writing of his later Riel plays).⁶

Given this background, it is not surprising that Riel can function in two roles as national-liberation leader: as defender of the Métis *vis-à-vis* Canada and Britain, and as defender of Canada *vis-à-vis* the United States. Both fit Coulter's formula of "armed resistance by some small nations against forcible take-over by some powerful neighbour." The equivocation reflects Canada's

4 Thomas Flanagan, "The Sovereignty and Nationhood of Canadian Indians: A Comment on Boldt and Long," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 17 (1965), 367-74.

5 Cited in Margaret Gail Osachoff, "Riel on Stage," *Canadian Drama*, 8 (1982), 134.

6 Wolfgang Klooss, *Geschichte und Mythos in der Literatur Kanadas: Die englischsprachige Métis- und Riel-Rezeption* (Kiel: Habilitationsschrift der Philosophischen Fakultät), pp. 447-8, 464-8.

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1 Charles Pelham Mulvaney, *The History of the North West Rebellion of 1885* (Toronto: Coles, 1971; reprint of 1885 edn.), p. 28.

2 George F.G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963; reprint of 1936 edn.); *idem*, *Louis Riel* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1963).

3 George Manuel and Michael Posluns, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (Don Mills: Collier Macmillan, 1974).

ambiguous position in the international system as an advanced industrial society that is also a dependent client of the United States.

Strange Empire, by Joseph Kinsey Howard (1952), set the story of the Indians and Métis in a context drawn from the Second World War:

The crime of genocide is older than its name The races with which we are concerned in this book were martyred in the name of Manifest Destiny or Canada First or an Anglo-Saxon God. There were no gas chambers then, but there was malevolent intention; and there were guns and hunger, smallpox and syphilis, and "backward" peoples, then as now, could be used as puppets in the power politics of dynamic "civilized" states.⁷

Strange Empire is undoubtedly the most readable, even the most gripping account of Riel's life ever written. Scholars use it with caution, but it has been reprinted several times and has been widely influential.

After Coulter and Howard there have been so many popular histories and so many poems, plays, and novels about Riel that it would take a monograph to survey them all.⁸ Riel as national-liberation leader remains the general theme, with minor variations. Rudy Wiebe, portraying him as a peaceful mystic desirous of the Kingdom of God on earth, makes him say, "Why don't we make a heaven here in the North-West, where we can have peace between all people, no killing?"⁹ Stanley Ryerson sees him as a progressive coming "into collision with the entrenched interests of great property in power."¹⁰ Janet Rosenstock and Dennis Adair, novelizing the CBC's drama *Riel* (1979), suggest a comparison with liberation theology.¹¹

Rather than a single image of Riel today, among the English-Canadian literary public there is a set of overlapping themes attached to his name: national liberation, self-determination, Canadian nationalism, anti-imperialism, racial equality, social equality, and so on. These themes all belong to the vocabulary of the contemporary "left," to use an imprecise term, rather than to the "right." It is fitting that the last attempt in Parliament to repeal Riel's conviction was made by the New Democratic Party.¹²

The notion of "left" is amorphous because it incorporates at least three levels of meaning. The original left-right distinction, as it emerged in the French

⁷ Joseph Howard, *Strange Empire: Louis Riel and the Métis People* (Toronto: James Lewis and Samuel, 1974; reprint of 1952 edn.), pp. 17–18.

⁸ In addition to Klooss, see Donald Swainson, "Rieliana and the Structure of Canadian History," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 14 (1980), 286–97; Douglas Owrn, "The Myth of Louis Riel," *Canadian Historical Review*, 43 (1982), 315–16; George F.G. Stanley, "The Last Word on Louis Riel—The Man of Several Faces," in F.L. Barron and J.D. Waldram, eds., *1885 and After* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1986), pp. 3–22.

⁹ Rudy Wiebe, *The Scorched-Wood People* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p. 53.

¹⁰ Quoted in Owrn, "The Myth of Louis Riel," p. 328.

¹¹ Janet Rosenstock and Dennis Adair, *Riel: Novelization* (Markham, Ont.: PaperJacks, 1979), pp. 7–8.

¹² *House of Commons Debates*, 31 Jan. 1985, pp. 1888ff.

Revolution, represented a desire for popular self-government as against the power of the monarchy and aristocracy. In the nineteenth century, the democratic left was overlaid by the socialist left, whose main issue was economic equality.¹³ In the twentieth century the issue of national liberation from political and economic "imperialism" has been added on to the other two. Underlying these changes and giving the left some coherence over time is an attitude of "setting to itself ideas that are unreachable in order that it stands always in opposition, remains always a contradiction, always in a position to perform its function of creation through destruction."¹⁴ Or again: "Attachment to one's privileges and to the hierarchical order is on the right; the desire to bring that order down is on the left."¹⁵

Although the attitude of opposition may be consistent, the vision of the left is plagued with internal inconsistencies. The phases of leftist ideology over the last two centuries may be seen as unsuccessful attempts to achieve liberty, equality, and fraternity simultaneously. The problem of the left is that attainment of one goal does not necessarily produce the others and may even work against them. Democracy did not bring economic equality; socialism, at least in its most thoroughgoing form, has repressed individual freedom; and national liberation in most of the Third World has produced neither individual liberty nor economic equality.

I do not wish to exploit these often-remarked contradictions here; rather, I wish to show that Louis Riel, understood in proper historical context, did not belong to the left in any of its senses. The accumulation of all of Riel's writings by the Louis Riel project makes possible a well-founded assessment of the man's political thought. The evidence shows overwhelmingly that Riel was antagonistic to most of what the left has stood for.

The first point to note is Riel's lifelong attachment to the Conservative party. After being dismissed from the College of Montreal in 1866, he wrote three *lettres en vers* to George Etienne Cartier, pleading for a patronage job.¹⁶ In 1872 he stepped aside in the riding of Provencher so that Cartier could be nominated as a candidate for the House of Commons. Riel wrote later that he would have liked to call himself a Conservative in these years and that the only reason he did not was for fear of forcing his personal opponents among the Métis to style themselves Liberals.¹⁷ Even imprisoned in Regina in 1885, Riel still tried to present himself as a Conservative, writing to Governor Dewdney, "Je me défends et je défends me amis et les droits du Nord ouest contre les

¹³ David Cauter, *The Left in Europe since 1789* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), chaps. 1 and 2.

¹⁴ J.A. Laponce, *Left and Right: The Topography of Political Perceptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁶ George F.G. Stanley, et al., *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel / Les Ecrits complets de Louis Riel*, 5 vols. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1985), vol. iv, pp. 67–73, 75–8.

Hereafter *cw*.

¹⁷ *cw*, vol. i, p. 451.

Libéraux du Haut Canada : et de l'autre côté, je demande au parti conservateur mes droits, qu'il ne m'a pas encore donnés du tout."¹⁸

To be sure, Riel had many contacts with Liberals throughout his life. He read law briefly in the office of Rodolphe Laflamme after Cartier failed to find a place for him, and he tried to get an amnesty from the federal Liberal government in 1874–75. He had several influential Liberal friends, such as the physicians E.-P. Lachapelle and Romuald Fiset, who was M.P. for Rimouski. It was chiefly the Liberals of Quebec who came to his aid in 1885 by organizing a committee of defence and sending Charles Fitzpatrick and F.-X. Lemieux, two young and rising Liberal lawyers, to represent him. Grateful as he was for this support, Riel wished also to have Conservative lawyers, illustrating his reluctance to associate himself unequivocally with the Liberals.¹⁹

Moreover, Riel's preference for the Conservative party was especially strong for its most reactionary element, the ultramontanes of Quebec. His chief sponsor in Quebec politics was Alphonse Desjardins, owner of the ultramontane newspaper *Le Nouveau Monde*. Desjardins put his newspaper in Riel's service to publish his pamphlet on the amnesty as well as other manifestos.²⁰ The Catholic Programme of 1871, which Riel wanted to adopt for his own, was drawn up in a meeting at the home of Desjardins. Others at that meeting who would later receive favourable mention in Riel's writings were F.-X. Trudel and Canon Godfroy Lamarche.²¹ Riel's loyalties were equally with the ultramontanes in Church politics. L.-F.-R. LaFlèche, bishop of Trois-Rivières and author of the ultramontane classic *Quelques Considérations sur les rapports de la société avec la religion et la famille*, had been a missionary in Rupert's Land and one of Louis's first teachers. A.-A. Taché, archbishop of St. Boniface and the patron who made Riel's education possible, also supported the Catholic Programme,²² and of course Riel's greatest idol among the clergy was Ignace Bourget, bishop of Montreal, the acknowledged leader of the ultramontane faction.

The Quebec ultramontanes took their cue from Pope Pius IX, the most reactionary of modern pontiffs. His *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) had denounced liberalism and denied that the faithful should reconcile themselves with it. Riel saw him, as late as 1876, as the "immortal" Pius IX,²³ the "prisoner of the Vatican," bravely holding out against the liberal and secular forces of the Risorgimento that had made Italy a modern nation-state. When Riel became disillusioned with Pius IX in 1877, it was on the astonishing grounds that the pope was too liberal: "Vous êtes libéral! Vous êtes Caïphe! Malheur aux

18 *CW*, vol. III, p. 112.

19 *CW*, vol. III, pp. 111, 131.

20 *CW*, vol. I, pp. 298–319, 378–49, 460–1.

21 Mason Wade, *The French Canadians 1760–1967*, rev. edn. (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968), p. 354.

22 *Ibid.*

23 E.g., *CW*, vol. II, p. 81.

décisions de Rome."²⁴ (Riel was probably irritated by the Papal See's intervention against the ultramontanes in an internal squabble of the Quebec hierarchy.)²⁵ It is hard to find a place on the political spectrum for someone who thought Pius IX had become a leftist in his old age!

Riel sympathized with reactionary Catholic leaders around the world. His writings contain several favourable references to "Henry V," the Comte de Chambord, legitimist pretender to the throne of France. He even celebrated Henry V in poetry after the latter's death:

Henri! vous avez mis avant tout les principes,
Et vous avez montré comme on doit y tenir.
On respire de loin le parfum des Tulippes
Que vous apportent ceux qui viennent vous bénir.²⁶

Riel speculated that he himself might be the successor of Henry V as a leader who could restore France to the principles of throne and altar.²⁷ He also compared himself to Don Carlos, the reactionary protagonist of the Carlist civil war in Spain.²⁸ Regarding Latin America, Riel looked benignly on the imperial adventure of Maximilian in Mexico,²⁹ and he greatly admired Gabriel Garcia Moreno, the dictator of Ecuador who dedicated that country to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He even thought the South Pole might be renamed the "Pole Moreno."³⁰

Riel's religious and political heroes were those who led the struggle against the "universal liberalism" that enveloped the world.³¹ At one level Riel equated liberalism with a secular orientation towards politics. He castigated both Bismarck and Victor Emmanuel as liberal because they came into political conflict with the Catholic Church.³² Indeed, any secular state was tainted with liberalism: "Parce que les gouvernements mondains ne sont pas conservateurs de la loi évangélique, ils sont tous Libéraux. Je sais que les gouvernements constitutionnels sont des gouvernements de servitude et d'esclavage."³³

At another level Riel thought of liberalism as a condition of moral self-indulgence: "Ce libéralisme qui consiste à tourner le dos à Dieu, à fuir les oeuvres de la vertu persévérante, pour l'amour de ses aises, de la mollesse et des plaisirs sensuels."³⁴ It was against liberalism in this extended sense that

24 *CW*, vol. II, p. 112.

25 Thomas Flanagan, *Louis "David" Riel: "Prophet of the New World"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 80–1.

26 *CW*, vol. IV, p. 383.

27 *CW*, vol. III, p. 209.

28 *CW*, vol. II, p. 34.

29 *CW*, vol. III, p. 326.

30 *CW*, vol. III, p. 344.

31 *CW*, vol. II, p. 137.

32 *CW*, vol. II, pp. 68, 112.

33 *CW*, vol. II, p. 90.

34 *CW*, vol. II, p. 146.

Riel directed his revival of the Mosaic Law, including polygamy: "Dieu veut la polygamie: c'est une des plus considérables barrières à opposer au libéralisme de l'homme et de la femme."³⁵ And again: "Toutes les lois de Moïse sont des lois conservatrices."³⁶ Saint Paul had led the Church into liberalism by breaking with the Mosaic Law. God had allowed that deviation from rectitude because it made the Gospel easier to preach to the Gentiles, but it was time now to return to the example of Jesus, who had lived within the Law.³⁷

Riel's vision of a reformed Catholicism incorporating a revived Mosaic Law was similar to that of Islam, although he would have abhorred the comparison. Because he wanted the universality of a world religion, he had to transcend the national limitations of Judaism, but he disliked the divorce between law and private conscience that had emerged in Christianity. He wanted something like the Islamic *Shari'a*, an all-encompassing body of law that draws no distinction between the religious and secular spheres.³⁸

The concept of individual or personal freedom, which is part of the political tradition of Western civilization, assumes limitations on the power of government. The state is set off against the church, as in the Gelasian doctrine of the "two swords" in medieval Christendom, or against society, as in the contemporary secular phase of Western civilization.

Riel, in common with many millenarian prophets, espoused a monistic vision of society in which church and state would merge in support of a purified way of life. Consider these statements from a letter to Archbishop Taché:

Depuis dix-huit cents ans le véritable Sacerdoce n'a eu à proprement parler, que des moyens de persuasion pour convertir le monde . . . Jésus Christ veut perfectionner le gouvernement de son église et mettre ses apôtres en état de forcer charitablement les hommes à suivre corps et ame les conditions de la vie, afin que les individus, les familles et les peuples trouvent dans le Sacerdoce Catholique, Apostolique qui vient de Rome, la régénération spirituelle et corporelle dont le monde a besoin.

Pour moi, je ne conçois pas votre pouvoir spirituel sans le pouvoir temporel . . . Conduisez-nous, tous les métis, et par le gouvernement de votre esprit et par celui de votre main. Nous ne reclamons plus la liberté de professer des opinions contraires à votre manière de voir. La libre pensée est fatale. Elle est la mère du libertinage ou du libéralisme.³⁹

The proper term for this conflation of spiritual and temporal authority, together with the extinction of personal freedom in the liberal sense, is theocracy. Riel took to its logical conclusion the theocratic impulse that was part of, but did not totally dominate, ultramontanism. He did not, however, have a clear plan for

35 *Ibid.*

36 *CW*, vol. II, p. 156.

37 *CW*, vol. II, pp. 158–9.

38 Cf. Daniel Pipes, *In the Path of God: Islam and Political Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), pp. 29–47.

39 *CW*, vol. II, pp. 88–90.

designing theocratic institutions. Rather, his writings contain a number of suggestions pointing in a theocratic direction, such as the idea that Archbishop Taché should assume temporal as well as spiritual power. At other moments Riel conceived of himself as a "priest-king" and "infallible pontiff" to boot, thus uniting all authority in his own hands.⁴⁰

But these were ideas of his excited period in the asylum of Beauport. At a calmer time, probably the winter of 1880–81, he sketched out a less egocentric form of theocratic government in his lost book entitled *Massinahican*, the Cree word for "book" or "Bible." The few fragments that remain hint at an almost Platonic organization of society into castes of clergy, soldiers, and "simple faithful." All social orders or estates would have councils that would meet periodically as separate bodies and once every thirty years combined into a grand council. All nations of the New World with their separate religious denominations would be involved in this scheme, "dont le but serait de reformer sans cesse le clergé, les soldats et les simples fidèles appartenant à chaque dénomination."⁴¹ It is a pity that we do not know more of this scheme, but even our fragmentary knowledge of it shows a striking contrast with secular institutions of representative government.

Similarly, Riel was reluctant to form a secular government during the North-West Rebellion. He explained the term "Exovedate," which he coined for the Métis council of war, as follows:

From two Latin words, *Ex* which means from, and *Ovile* flock.

That word I made use of to convey that I was assuming no authority at all. And the advisers of the movement took also that title instead of councillors or representatives: and their purpose in doing so was exactly the same as mine: no assumption of authority [*sic*].⁴²

As I have shown elsewhere, the Exovedate performed both temporal and spiritual functions. Even while running the war effort, it debated theological subtleties and introduced new religious ceremonies. Riel was not officially a member, preferring the extra-institutional note of prophet; but in fact he deliberated with the Exovedate and often used the title "Exovede."⁴³

Even after his imprisonment in Regina Riel continued to speculate on the reform of religious and political institutions. In a letter to the prime minister he suggested that the United States and Britain should merge to form a new "imperial union." Ignoring the pope, the government should seek out "parmi les Sujets et les Citoyens, quelqu'un de connu par sa profonde sagesse, par sa vertu, par sa science et une vaste intelligence . . ." This remarkable personage would be authorized to deal with all denominations, "promouvoir les intérêts

40 Flanagan, *Louis "David" Riel*, pp. 76–81.

41 *CW*, vol. II, p. 231.

42 *CW*, vol. III, p. 90.

43 Flanagan, *Louis "David" Riel*, pp. 136–49.

[sic] de l'harmonie la plus parfaite possible." Riel did not explicitly nominate himself for the job, but it certainly would have been consonant with the role he saw for himself.⁴⁴

He also conceived an imaginative solution to the political problems of France, proposing that the republicans, monarchists, and Bonapartists should unite under "un des rejetons de Saint Louis, qui soit pieux, dévoué aux intérêts de la sainte église et vraiment rempli d'amour pour tout son peuple . . . , et qui n'aurait pas d'autre titre que celui d'Exovide."⁴⁵ Again Riel, who considered himself a descendant of Saint Louis, probably had himself in mind as the first "Exovide de France."

None of these proposals, from priest-king to Exovede, should be taken as serious political theory, but they do symbolize Riel's outlook. It is clear that he disliked the internal conflicts of a pluralistic society as well as the institutions of representative government which contain those conflicts. He believed social harmony could be obtained through some sort of council system, presided over by a charismatic individual ruling with the aid of divine inspiration. The details are evanescent, but the theocratic intention is unmistakable.

It is fruitless to try to locate Riel on a left-right spectrum of twentieth-century ideologies. Communism, socialism, liberalism, conservatism, and fascism are all secular systems of thought; their adherents may or may not be religious, but the political ideology does not follow in any important way from the presence or absence of religious belief. Riel's theocratic nostalgia for the *ancien régime* simply does not fit into this secular world of thought.

He is, however, easy to locate in nineteenth-century terms. He belonged to the reactionary right, to those who never accepted the French Revolution, democracy, individualism, and the secular society. At least he started there. But in putting himself forward as a divinely inspired prophet and religious founder, he became a would-be revolutionary of the right, bent on creating a new moral order. Perhaps the best comparison that could be drawn with one of today's political leaders would be with that sprightliest of all senior citizens, the Ayatollah Khomeini.⁴⁶

The left-wing images which cluster around Riel today—frontier democrat, prairie proto-populist, leader of national liberation, liberation theologian, opponent of racism—are almost wholly false when measured against the historical facts. Those images exist for contemporary reasons that have nothing to do with historical scholarship, so they will be as little affected by this paper as by previous publications in the same vein. None the less, it is the responsibility of researchers to make the historical truth available to those who care about it. After making due allowance for the scholar's perspective, values, and choice of topics, one can still agree with Ranke that there is an objective history, *wie es*

eigentlich gewesen. The five volumes of *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel* are intended to be a contribution to that objective history. There will still be different views of so complex a figure as Riel, but henceforth no interpretation will be credible among scholars if it does not take account of the evidence printed in the *Collected Writings*. Voltaire's cynical aphorism, that history is a pack of tricks we play on the dead, may apply to popularized images of historical figures, but it need not and should not apply to historical scholarship. The scholar's task is to rediscover human beings, not to bow down before icons.

44 CW, vol. III, pp. 124–5.

45 CW, vol. III, p. 211.

46 J.S. Ismael and T.Y. Ismael, "Social Change in Islamic Society: The Political Thought of Ayatollah Khomeini," *Social Problems*, 27 (1980), 601–19.