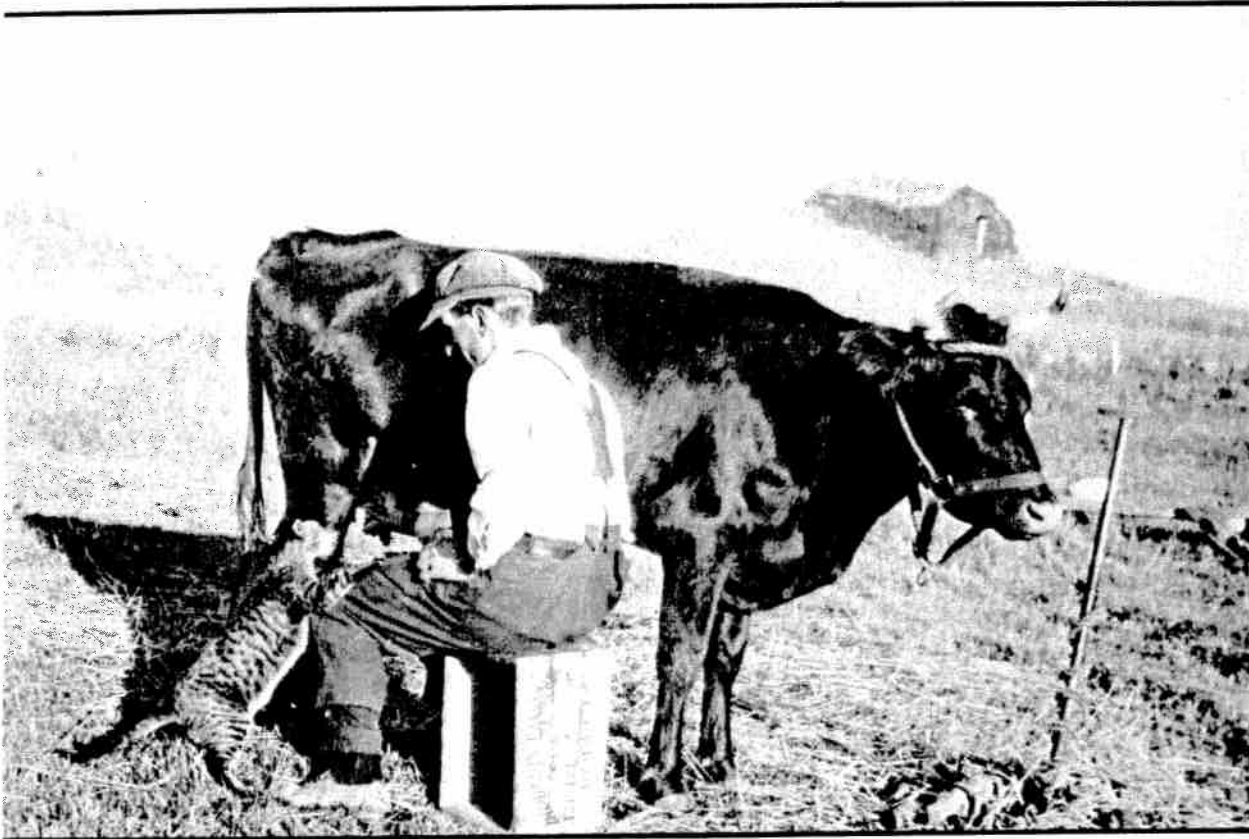


Alberta history

SPRING 1984



Feeding the cat, c.1910-14.

- Crowsnest Pass Holdup
- Canmore Resource Development
- Gertrude and Waterton Mills
- Riel: A Criticism & a Response

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Cover Illustration: One of the popular subjects for Brownie cameras on the farm was that of the old cat getting a free lunch at milking time. Here, Jack Adams of Endiang has his cow tethered to a crowbar, about 1910-14, while the tabby is fed.

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Riel

A Criticism and a Response

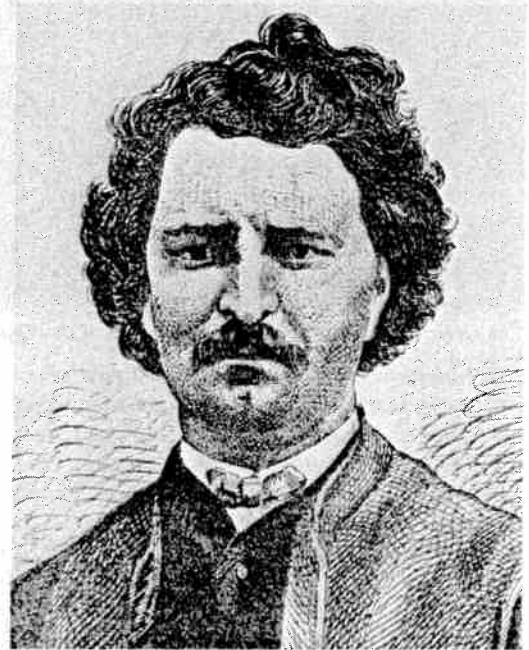
Late in 1983, Thomas Flanagan published a book entitled *Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered* (Saskatoon: Prairie Books, 192 pp. \$12.95) which has become the source of considerable controversy, particularly among some native groups. Murray Dobbin, Project Co-ordinator for the Batoche Centenary Corporation in Saskatchewan, was invited to review the book. In turn, and with Mr. Dobbin's permission, Dr. Flanagan has responded. Their two essays are presented here.

Thomas Flanagan's *Riel*: An Unfortunate Obsession

A Review by Murray Dobbin

Thomas Flanagan sets out in his new book to accomplish a very specific task: to answer certain questions about the historical role of Louis Riel and the Metis people with respect to the North-West Rebellion. He feels his contribution "... will be to set these questions in the context of the day..." Unfortunately for the reader, and I think, eventually, for Flanagan, the book sheds more heat than light on the questions and fails utterly to put events into context. Indeed the questions he does not address (by posing the questions he does address in such a biased manner), the evidence he leaves out and the removal of events from the broader historical context, render this book a fundamentally flawed effort. As if this were not enough, its tone in villifying Riel is so vicious and patently unfair that the book very nearly becomes a diatribe.

Posing historical questions is always a tricky business and historians often differ in the questions they ask. Yet all historians must put their specific questions in broad enough context that basic questions do not get left out. It is here that Flanagan fails most dramatically. Hence, in asking "Were the Metis justified in taking up arms?" Flanagan completely ignores a question critical to understanding the armed conflict: Did the federal government deliberately provoke the Metis for its own political ends, i.e. to build political support for the completion of the CPR? Similarly, Flanagan asks: "Was the government justified in hanging Riel?" but leaves out entirely the absolutely cynical decision of the government to hang Riel in order to passify Ontario. In at least one other instance the question posed is so loaded as to render its answer suspect. Thus when the author asks, "What was Riel's real object in



Louis Riel.

the agitation?" he reveals only too clearly where his bias lies. And the zeal with which he pursues that bias leads him to contradict his own evidence, ignore evidence well established by other historians and indulge in ridicule of the Metis people and their leader.

Before dealing with some of Flanagan's questions and answers, it is appropriate to deal with the question of bias. First, let us be clear about this question — no writer is completely free of bias, either in methodology or ideology. Yet it is demanded and expected of historians that they be fair to the facts and the personalities of history. In too many instances Flanagan is not. His evident (though unexplained) contempt for Riel leads him to conclusions which contradict the limited evidence he does bring to bear. For instance, he attacks Riel for demonstrating "self-

“serving venality” in suggesting that he would accept money from the government in return for leaving the country. Besides ignoring the question of whether the rebellion would have taken place in any case, Flanagan continues the attack, with no decisive new evidence to support his radical claim that money was Riel’s *principal* motive. He condemns Riel in spite of pointing out later that Riel was not interested in the money for personal use. He merely mentions that Riel put forward arguments supporting the amount of money involved without making any attempt to determine whether the arguments were valid. He examines in minute detail any evidence which puts Riel in a bad light and mentions only in passing that which does not.

Two key questions examined by Flanagan deserve special attention for they are basic to all the others. The first deals with the immediate cause of the outbreak of violence; the second with the dual question of Riel’s “real object” and the legitimacy of the rebellion. Throughout the book Flanagan uses extremely loose language referring to Riel’s “launching of an attack on Canada.” (He later exposes his emotional distortions when he contradicts this repeated assertion, albeit in a single sentence). Flanagan has ignored factors in the immediate cause of the conflict that can only be described as decisive. First, there is evidence implicating J.A. Macdonald in Lt. Governor Dewdney’s successful effort to, in Macdonald’s words, “secure” the Prince Albert Times — i.e. to turn it from a sympathetic observer of events to a virulently anti-Riel, anti-reform crusader. More importantly, he writes out of history one of the key players in the whole rebellion and the events leading up to it. That player is Lawrence Clarke, who Flanagan mentions very briefly, only twice and in very insignificant roles. Clarke’s role is crucial to understanding why the Metis ended up confronting the NWMP and Prince Albert militia at Duck Lake — a battle which ensured a full scale rebellion. Flanagan dates the decision to engage in battle back to February 8, 1885, the day Riel read a telegram from Ottawa stating that the government had decided to “investigate half breed claims . . .” Riel is quoted as having said “Ottawa will have my answer in forty days,” — a reference to the establishment of a provisional government. While this step was clearly a crucial one in the eventual confrontation, the actual armed conflict was fomented by Clarke and in such a manner that one cannot avoid the

suspicion that it was quite deliberate and further, that Ottawa, at the very least, acquiesced in the plan.

Lawrence Clarke was a prominent Tory, a former N.W.T. MP and a long time HBC executive well known to the Metis. In early 1885, the agitation among the Metis had died down with expectations that the government would negotiate with an acceptable emissary of the Metis. Clarke was chosen by the Metis for the job. Clarke had let on that he was sympathetic to the Metis but in reality was part of a Prince Albert clique who believed that a Metis rebellion was the surest way to speed completion of the railway and the development of the West. It is well documented that Clarke was identified by government officials as the man to trust with respect to intelligence on the Metis. Before and after the rebellion Clarke was privy to the secret code with which messages were sent from Ottawa to the N.W.T. Many historians — including Norman Black, A.S. Morton and George Stanley — have come to the conclusion that Clarke if not both a government spy and an agent provocateur was certainly the key figure in fomenting the violence.

Two specific actions by Clarke were critical in bringing about the first armed conflict. The first was the message he brought back to the Metis from Ottawa. While some accounts suggest the fateful message — which was that Ottawa’s only answer would be bullets and that 500 policemen were on their way to arrest Riel — was delivered by chance to Dumont, this is quite false. Clarke was an official, and trusted emissary and his message was official. It had the effect of completely panicking the Metis who immediately began a general mobilization. Clarke’s second provocative act occurred just prior to and in relation to the battle at Duck Lake. Sgt. Crozier, in charge of the Prince Albert NWMP, was awaiting reinforcements. The military situation was a stand-off, with the Metis having seized arms and both they and Crozier trying to prevent the other from consolidating positions. Neither side seemed anxious for a fight and Crozier believed, probably correctly, that reinforcements would seal the peace. In this situation, Clarke taunted Crozier, asking him if he were afraid to arrest the rebels and urging a confrontation. Crozier’s immature and ill-advised response brought on the start of the rebellion.

There is much more circumstantial evidence suggesting a deliberate conspiracy by Ottawa to

foment armed rebellion — the purpose being to build popular support for the CPR which, at the time, was incapable of extracting another nickel in public funds. Besides needing the railway as part of the national policy, Ottawa was being pressured to assist Britain in sending troops to the far east in anticipation of imminent war with Russia.

Neither Flanagan nor any other historian is obliged to accept this circumstantial evidence as definitive proof of a conspiracy. But its weight is such that to blithely ignore it when claiming to examine the causes of the rebellion verges on deceit.

Throughout the book Flanagan repeats and repeats his favorite themes: that Riel had a secret agenda and that the Metis' grievances were about to be met by Ottawa. To support this latter claim, Flanagan engages in a tortuous effort to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear evidence. Indeed, except for a telegram from Ottawa saying the government was going to "examine" Metis claims (is there any wonder Riel was furious?) there was absolutely no reason for the Metis to suddenly trust Ottawa. Flanagan comes to this remarkable conclusion: ". . . though (government) delay may have exacerbated hostility, it cannot be reasonably said that the government ultimately failed to carry out its responsibilities." This remark is preposterous and flies in the face of the author's own evidence.

As for Riel's "secret agenda," "ulterior motives," etc. Flanagan can only maintain his argument by an astonishing failure to put matters in historical context.

There is virtually no mention of the experience that the Saskatchewan River Metis faced at Red River after 1870 — illegal seizure of their land, physical and racial abuse by Orangemen that went completely unpunished and the deliberate delay of the promised land grant in order to ensure its quick transfer to speculators. Nor does Flanagan take serious account of the fifteen years of neglect by Ottawa or the desperate economic straits faced by the Metis. It is precisely this *history* which explains the rebellion, yet the author makes scant reference to it.

This is not surprising, for to maintain the argument that Riel had "secret motives" far beyond the "petty grievances" of the Metis, Flanagan is obliged to ignore history. Thus he can claim

that Riel's concept of a "vast trust fund for future (Metis) generations" is an ulterior motive. In fact, it was inspired precisely by Riel's knowledge of the scrip fiasco in Manitoba, and it was exactly this kind of foresight and leadership that the Metis expected from Riel. It was this capacity which prompted their invitation to him.

Continuing to ignore and otherwise distort history, Flanagan insists that the government met its obligations. This he does without so much as a mention of the massive scrip fraud which was visited upon the Metis after the rebellion — a fraud in which the government was complicit, informing speculators of scrip commission meetings and eventually passing legislation preventing prosecution of the crooks. There were no negotiations with Metis leaders regarding the method of land distribution. Clearly, scrip (especially money scrip which the government could have chosen not to offer) was chosen in order to secure results identical to those in Manitoba: The quick and easy passage of land to speculators and from there to immigrants and the creation of a cheap farm-labor pool out of the newly landless Metis.

Riel's foresight was brilliant, his fears justified and prophetic; Flanagan denounces and ridicules him for "ulterior motives." And to add insult to injury he states that the Metis did not really want land at all — they wanted money. (This contradicts everything he said up to that point, i.e.: that throughout the agitation the Metis' preoccupation was with land). In the preface, Flanagan reveals his inability to understand the Metis conflicts when he ridicules the notion that these were "national liberation struggles." This is just what 1869-70 represented and its similarities to the rebellions of 1837 have been pointed out by many historians. The 1885 uprising was a last gasp of that nationalist struggle.

Unfortunately, one could go on at much greater length underlining the serious flaws in this misguided effort. For pure nastiness and vengefulness it is unmatched in recent literature. It is not simply flawed, but fundamentally flawed. All in all it is a shameful and wasted effort that people would be well advised to avoid — unless, of course, they are interested in a case study of how uncomely zeal can lead a good historian to blatantly misrepresent history.

The Man Who Couldn't Quote Straight

A Response by Thomas Flanagan

Murray Dobbin does not like my book. That does not surprise me since I know something of his views from reading *The One-And-A-Half Men: The Story of Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris, Métis Patriots of the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1981). This book is a useful work containing much new and important information, but it exhibits a Marxist ideology not shared by most Canadians. If not a Communist, Mr. Dobbin is sympathetic enough to the Party to parrot its opportunistic "analyses" of events. (See, for example, his treatment of the Communists' *de facto* support of the Axis Powers in the first two years of World War Two, p. 138.) Readers may wish to keep his radical Marxist orientation in mind when evaluating his review of my book.

However great may be the ideological distance between a reviewer and his subject, it seems to me that a reviewer has certain duties to fulfill. First, he should give readers a fair idea of the book's contents. Judging from Mr. Dobbin's effort, you might guess that *Riel and the Rebellion* deals with the scrip question and with Riel's attempts to have the government pay him an indemnity; but you would never know that the book contains a long chapter on the river lot question, an interpretation of Riel's views on aboriginal rights, a discussion of his collaboration with William Henry Jackson, an extended analysis of his trial, an account of the "medical commission" which examined him shortly before his execution, and an analysis of the contemporary debates over a posthumous pardon. Practically all of Mr. Dobbin's time was spent discussing the book he thinks should have been written. Maybe someday he will produce his own Marxist study, *Louis Riel: Métis Patriot of the Nineteenth Century*; but until then he should not agree to review books on Riel if he is unable or unwilling to do the job correctly.

Second, a reviewer should accurately represent the author's conclusions and above all should be correct in quotations from the text. It is not that hard to quote correctly. It does not even take a trip to the library since a free copy of the book is always furnished to the reviewer. I spent several hours trying to verify the sixteen quotations which Mr. Dobbin attributes to me. Only

one seems to me to be substantially accurate. The other fifteen illustrate most of the possible ways of misquoting an author. In fortunate cases, Dobbin just carelessly gets the words wrong. In more regrettable instances, he takes phrases out of sentences, and sentences out of paragraphs where context is crucial to the meaning. For example, he quotes the following sentence, with only two minor inaccuracies: "Although the delay may have exacerbated hostility, it cannot reasonably be said that the government ultimately failed to carry out its responsibilities" (48). Although he got the words almost right, he got the meaning wrong. This sentence comes from the chapter about river lots, whereas he quotes it in connection with the question of scrip. To misquote it in this way is an irresponsible distortion of what I wrote. And there is more. In one remarkable parody of the scholarly method, Dobbin quotes himself and attributes it to me, then conflates this pseudo-citation with another wholly false quotation — all in one page of typescript. (See the progression from secret agenda to "secret agenda," the juxtaposition with "ulterior motives," then the conflated "secret motives.") None of these phrases are mine, as the reviewer would have discovered if he had adhered to the scholarly obligation to give page references.

Rather than waste more time criticizing the shoddiness of the review, let me comment on two of the few factual points Mr. Dobbin has raised. He writes: "Indeed, except for a telegram from Ottawa saying the government was going to 'examine' Métis claims (is there any wonder Riel was furious?) there was absolutely no reason for the Métis to suddenly trust Ottawa." His point is that the government had not made any real concession in its order-in-council of January 28, 1885, which authorized the Minister of the Interior to enumerate the Métis of the North-West. Although my book severely criticizes the government's "serious error of judgment" (71) in communicating this news to St. Laurent through a brief telegram, the government's action was intended to meet the Métis demand for a land grant. The order-in-council specified that the enumeration would be made "with a view to settling equitably the claims of Half-Breeds in Manitoba and the North-West Territories . . ." (P.C. 135/1885) It was not just an exercise in gathering statistics. The personnel of the Commission were being chosen even as things were coming to a head in St. Laurent. W.P.R. Street was invited in the second week of March to be chairman, and telegrams to A.E. Forget and Roger

Goulet went out on March 18 and 19. These actions cannot possibly be dismissed as reactions to the Métis insurrection. Nor are these facts news to researchers. They are drawn from documents published in *Canada Sessional Papers*, 1855, no. 116, and from Chairman Street's memoirs published in the *Canadian Historical Review*, 25 (March, 1944), pp. 38-53. News of the insurrection did impel Street to request a change in the Commission's mandate, so that scrip might be given immediately to the claimants in the field; but the Commission as such was not an improvised response to the outbreak of fighting.

The second point I would like to make concerns Mr. Dobbin's conspiracy theory of the Rebellion, according to which the insurrection should be understood as the result of a government provocation carried out through Lawrence Clarke as *agent provocateur*. The motive for the conspiracy was supposedly the Prime Minister's need to drum up popular support for completion of the CPR. Because I "blithely ignore[d]" this historical farrago, my book is accused of "verg[ing] on deceit." But no major researcher has ever taken seriously this interpretation of events — not George Stanley, not Desmond Morton, not George Woodcock, not the romantic Joseph Kinsey Howard, not the Métis historians A.S. Lussier and D.B. Sealey. My book does not include a chapter on the immediate prologue to the Rebellion because I felt that subject had been well covered, especially by Stanley and Woodcock. I would not bother now to deal with the Lawrence Clarke conspiracy theory except that an extended version of it has recently been published (Martin Shulman and Don McLean, "Lawrence Clarke: Architect of Revolt," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 3 (1983), pp. 57-69). Until I have the chance to publish something more substantial on this and earlier conspiracy theories, let me make the following brief remarks:

On March 1, 1885, Riel began to make belligerent public statements about a possible insurrection. On March 5, he had a secret meeting

with ten leading Métis. They all agreed to do everything necessary "pour sauver notre pays de la mauvaise gouverne en prenant les armes, s'il le faut." Even prior to that, Riel had written in his notebook: "O Sacré Coeur de Jésus, aidez au peuple métis à prendre les armes," (Public Archives of Canada, RG 13 B2, unnumbered pages after 2104). Riel and Dumont set the Métis in motion on March 18. They went through the whole community, telling the men to bring their guns when they would converge on St. Laurent on March 19. The Métis were already armed and moving when they met Lawrence Clarke, who told them the NWMP were coming. It is true that, as Riel put it, "il [Clarke] mit le feu à la Poudre" (PAC, RG 13 B 2, 1040; letter to Romuald Fiset, June 16, 1885). However, this episode has been put in proportion by George Woodcock, who can hardly be accused of lack of sympathy for the Métis:

... one should not exaggerate his [Clarke's] responsibility for what eventually happened, for it is obvious that by this time the militant leaders of the Métis had already decided on armed resistance, and that they welcomed the news that the Mounted Police had moved first, which enabled them to proceed with their plans, on the rather specious excuse that they were acting in self-defence. (Gabriel Dumont (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1975), pp. 164-165).

Clarke's second alleged provocation, that of encouraging Crozier to move decisively and secure Hillyard Mitchell's store, will not bear much weight. Crozier remained in command and responsible for his decision. In any case, the shooting broke out more or less unintentionally in a scuffle between Joe McKay and the Cree Aseweyin.

Unlike Mr. Dobbin, I am not able to pass judgment on the motives of those with whom I disagree. Hence, I cannot offer any explanation why he would believe the Lawrence Clarke conspiracy theory or would expect others to take it seriously. But promulgating such dubious hypothesis does a disservice not only to scholarship but to the legitimate political goals of the Métis people.

Last of the Cowboys

The genuine old time cowman is becoming about as rare as the dodo. There is no situation vacant for the man who wouldn't take the job of digging a well because he couldn't do it on horseback. The man who is wanted now must not only ride in the roundups, but he must put up hay, feed it out in winter, run a plow or harrow, dig the garden, or do anything else he is told — even to putting up stove pipes. The old figure was picturesque, but the present is more useful.

— The Macleod Gazette, Nov. 20, 1895