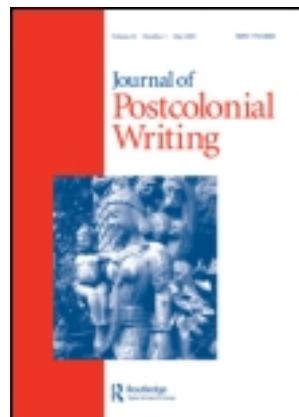


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Louis Riel and Métis literature

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NOTES

- 1 Harold Horwood, *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 4.
- 2 Fred Cogswell, "Orchestrated New Brunswick," *Canadian Literature*, 76 (1978), pp. 114-15.
- 3 David Adams Richards, *The Coming of Winter* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1974); *Blood Ties* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1976); *Dancers at Night* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1978); *Lives of Short Duration* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1981).
- 4 Douglas Barbour, "Realism With a Vengeance," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 19 (1977), p. 169.
- 5 Barbour, p. 170.
- 6 Richards, *Blood Ties*, p. 128.
- 7 William French, rev. of *Lives of Short Duration*, *Globe and Mail*, 23 Jan. 1982, p. E15.
- 8 Andrew Seaman, "All the Confusion of Their Lives," *Atlantic Provinces Book Review*, Mar. 1982, p. 4.
- 9 George Woodcock, "Fires in Winter," *Books in Canada*, Mar. 1982, p. 14.
- 10 Harry Thurston, "Canada Catches up with David Richards - at Last," *Atlantic Insight*, May 1982, p. 51.
- 11 Aritha van Herk, *Judith* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978).
- 12 Aritha van Herk, *The Tent Peg* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981).
- 13 See Judges, chapter four.
- 14 Keith Maillard, *Two Strand River* (Toronto: Press Porcépic, 1978; General Publishing, 1982). The more recent edition has a different ending from the original and is to be preferred.
- 15 Susan Musgrave, *The Charcoal Burners* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980), p. 66.
- 16 Musgrave, p. 70.

Louis Riel and Métis Literature

World Literature Written in English, Volume 24, No. 1 (1984), 135-144.

THOMAS FLANAGAN

The British empire has given rise to four liberal democracies in which an overwhelming white majority co-exists with a much smaller indigenous population: the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In its own way, each of these four countries has formulated legal definitions for its indigenous people(s) (Canada and the United States have both Indians and Inuit to deal with). Canada is unique among this group for also having granted aboriginal status, albeit in a tentative and confusing way, to a mixed-race group, the Métis. In the other countries, mixed-blood individuals can be either white or native but not a unique race in between.

"Métis," pronounced "Mā-tis," is a French word meaning mixed blood. It

is the Gallicized form of the Portuguese-Spanish slave-trade word "mestizo." Until around 1940, people of mixed Indian-white ancestry in Canada were usually called, and called themselves, half-breed when English was spoken and Métis when French was spoken. During the last fifty years, in a process that has never been properly explored, Métis has entered the English language, apparently as a euphemism for half-breed, which is now often perceived as a pejorative label. However, Métis in contemporary English is usually pronounced "Mā-tee," perhaps because of an impression among Anglophone Canadians, many of whom have studied a little French in school, that final consonants in French words are never pronounced. This generally correct rule does not apply to Métis because it is a loan word.

People of mixed race were born all across Canada, whenever whites came into contact with Indians or Inuit. However, in most circumstances they were absorbed into one of the parent populations. Only the Métis became a separate distinctive group due to the peculiar conditions of the fur trade in Rupert's Land. More than two centuries of steady contact between Indians and white traders unaccompanied by white women produced mixed-race people who came to play a distinctive role in the economy of the fur trade. There were two sub-groups among them: the English and Scottish half-breeds, whose fathers were Hudson's Bay Company traders and the French Métis, whose fathers, the *voyageurs* from New France, continued to work for new employers after the surrender of New France to Britain in 1763. Both groups, but particularly the French Métis, resisted the purchase of Rupert's Land by Canada in 1869 to 1870. The French Métis rose again in a tragic last stand in 1885. Their leader on both occasions was Louis Riel, the main subject of this paper.

After 1885, the Métis population, both Anglophone and Francophone, persisted demographically but was socially dispersed across the prairie provinces and the Mackenzie Valley. In the twentieth century, the Métis have become somewhat intermingled with "non-status Indians" - Indians who have lost their legal status as Indians, either voluntarily or involuntarily, through the application of certain provisions of the Indian Act. Today the term "Métis" is sometimes loosely used to refer to all people of mixed Indian-white ancestry, no matter how recent the liaison, and sometimes strictly used to refer to those mixed-blood people whose origins lie in the fur trade period. For several years, the two groups were loosely allied in the Native Council of Canada but have recently formed separate national organizations.¹ Their future relations will continue to be problematic, as Métis and non-status Indians have some interests in common but others which strongly diverge. To reduce the difference to its simplest dimensions, Métis wish to enhance their legal recognition as a distinct aboriginal people separate from both Indian and Inuit, whereas non-status Indians generally wish either to recover their lost Indian status or to be integrated into white society without barriers of racial discrimination.

Absence of clear legal definitions makes it impossible to say how many Métis there are. The Native Council of Canada used to say that it represented a million people.² This implausible figure would only be reached by counting all

Canadians, who though not legal Indians, had some Indian ancestry. Based on a self-definition question in the 1981 census, Statistics Canada recently reported the existence of 98,260 Métis and 75,110 non-status Indians.³ The vagueness of concepts like ethnic self-identification means that such data must be interpreted as a broad estimate, not a precise enumeration.

Under these confused circumstances, I regard it as irresponsible that Canada's politicians wrote into the package of constitutional amendments approved in 1982 the stipulation that the Métis are an aboriginal people.⁴ Determining who the Métis really are will long occupy the Canadian judges who will have to apply and interpret these amendments. For our purposes, however, it is not so important how many Métis there are or who precisely they are. It is enough to state that there is a Métis people, or "nation" as they call themselves, which is much older than the political entity of Canada, has a continuous historical experience of about 250 years and is vigorously resisting assimilation into Canadian (or Indian) society.

The Métis people are largely without a written literature in any language. A few French songs of the illiterate poet Pierre Falcon have been preserved from the early years of the nineteenth century when the Métis resisted the first attempts of the Earl of Douglas to create an agricultural colony in the Red River Valley. In contemporary times, numerous Métis have begun to write history, biography and autobiography. The most striking result of these efforts is, in my view, Maria Campbell's moving account of her own life, *Halfbreed*.⁵ Although there is surely much that I am not aware of, being a political scientist rather than a literary scholar, I am not able to think of any prominent works of Métis poetry, novels or drama – that is, works composed by Métis themselves in French, English or Indian languages. There is quite a large imaginative literature about the Métis, most of it dealing with Riel, but this, of course, is not the same thing as literature produced by one's own people.

The purpose of this paper is to point out that Riel himself might have become the founder of Métis literature if history had pursued a different course. Riel's biographers have always known that he liked to compose poetry, but their judgements on the merits of his verse were uniformly negative. Riel's schoolmate, J.O. Mousseau, wrote as early as 1886:

Sometimes he [Riel] cultivated the Muses, or sought to bestride Pegasus, but I must confess at once that this illustrious steed proved rather too stubborn, and he was never able to ride him in a skillful manner, that is to say, Louis Riel never was able to produce even a short piece of poetry bearing the mark of good style or sound criticism.⁶

To this, Riel's leading biographer, G.F.G. Stanley, added: "A harsh judgment perhaps, but not an untruthful one."⁷ Other historians have written in a similar vein. J.K. Howard noted that "Riel's verse style was uneven, the word selections and images were naive . . ."⁸ Perhaps the most complimentary judgement was from G.H. Needler, a professor of literature: "It is not quite lofty poetry, but it does display a considerable dexterity in rhyming and a

variety of metrical form."⁹ However, these traditional views of Riel's poetry are now subject to revision because they rested on inadequate knowledge of the sources. Most opinions were based on Riel's *Poésies religieuses et politiques*, a posthumous selection of his later works published by his family to demonstrate his loyalty to the Roman Catholic church.¹⁰ With the exception of the inclusion of a lively attack on Sir John A. Macdonald, they deliberately picked his dullest, most conventional, devotional verse. Apart from this, biographers, even the indefatigable Stanley, had access to only a few other scattered compositions. The biggest change in this picture occurred in 1966, when the Provincial Archives of Manitoba acquired from the Riel family a large quantity of papers, including many previously unknown poems by Louis. The single most important item was an eighty-page notebook of poetry composed when he was a young man in Montreal. This was published in 1977 as part of *Louis Riel: Poésies de jeunesse*.¹¹ New items have continued to appear with some regularity since 1966, so that we now have a total of about five hundred manuscript pages of Riel's poetry. All will be published in 1985 as volume four of *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel/Les Ecrits complets de Louis Riel*.¹²

Of the whole body of material, about twenty percent is in English and it is of no literary merit whatsoever. Although Riel spoke English competently, even eloquently, he did not control the language well enough to write poetry. One item, almost surely a school composition, is in Latin. It offers interesting insights into Riel's education and mental development, but will scarcely earn a place in Canadian or Métis literature.¹³ The remainder of the poetry, all written in French, is highly uneven. There is a large amount of unrevised verse, drafted in haste and never reworked, which is little better than doggerel. There are also a lot of pious, devotional poems dedicated to the saints or to Riel's clerical friends. Although some of them are reasonably polished, they have no appeal to the contemporary reader. They string together religious slogans and clichés without revealing the personal experience which our century has come to consider the essence of religion. However, the situation is not all bleak. There are a number of animal fables, modelled on those of Jean de La Fontaine, which are polished and clever. There are some love poems and a few other personal compositions which authentically express Riel's own emotions. There are sarcastic attacks on his political enemies which are sometimes savagely funny. And there are some poems dedicated to the Métis nation which, if not on the highest level of world literature, are worthy of being known because of Riel's position as the greatest leader that nation has ever produced.

Riel began to compose poetry while he was a student at the Collège de Montréal. The first text that can be dated precisely is from 15 January 1864, when he was nineteen. He continued to write throughout his life in a pattern of irregular bursts of energy, depending on circumstance and leisure time. Thus, he would compose a great deal when he was unemployed and/or cut off from politics but would write very little when actively engaged in other concerns. Some of his most productive periods were 1865 to 1866, after he had been

expelled from the Collège de Montréal and had not found a job; 1871, after the end of the Manitoba "Resistance"; 1876 to 1878, when he was involuntarily committed to the Beauport lunatic asylum in Quebec City; 1879, when he was a visitor for several months in St. Joseph, Dakota; 1883, when he was briefly imprisoned in Fort Benton, Montana, on charges of vote fraud; 1883 to 1884, when he was teaching school at St. Peter's Mission, Montana; and 1885, when he was imprisoned after the collapse of the Northwest Rebellion.

The pattern suggests that for Riel composing poetry was a sort of personal therapy to which he was especially drawn after the conclusion of some project or after suffering some personal or political reverse. He probably intended to publish his poetry one day, for many compositions went through multiple drafts culminating in a final fair copy. When he lived in Montana, he wrote at least one philosophical-political book, now lost, a publication often mentioned. He may have intended to publish some of his poetry as part of or along with his book, for he wrote, "Il me semble qu'il est nécessaire de les (ses pensées) introduire dans la religion, dans la science, la politique et *les lettres*."¹⁴ And again: "Si la Coopération Merveilleuse de Dieu ne se manifeste pas à l'appui de ma Théologie, de ma philosophie, de ma politique et de *ma littérature* . . ."¹⁵

Shortly before his death, Riel was still dreaming of becoming a published poet, even if only posthumously. He composed little scraps of verse in both French and English, which he gave to visitors and prison guards alike. One of these incidentally illustrates Riel's total lack of mastery of English versification:

After a while, I know the Boys
Will gather all my little scrips
Publish them as one of their joyce [sic]
And as a tie of our frie[n]dships
To celebrate
A true Prophet: Louis "D[avid]" Riel.¹⁶

In my opinion, Riel's poetry underwent a steady decline in quality as he grew older. Glen Campbell's careful analysis of Riel's youthful poetry shows that initially Riel had a sound knowledge of the complex rules of French prosody (*Poésies de jeunesse*, pp. 48-79). His lines, including the classical alexandrines which he used a great deal, always scanned properly. He knew when to elide neighbouring vowels and when to pronounce normally silent vowels. His rhymes were correct and often pleasingly complex. The vocabulary was large and literary. The standard poetic figures of speech were present. But in many of his later compositions, he did not bother with craftsmanship. He used simple lines of six or eight syllables, instead of the subtle alexandrine, his rhymes became banal and his vocabulary limited.

That he still retained his technical abilities is shown by his poem on Sir John A. Macdonald, which is as technically polished as anything written in his youth.¹⁷ Yet to me its literary merit is slight because there is no distance

between the poet and the subject. The poem is a tirade against Macdonald, a long outpouring of sarcasm and invective. There is no attempt to master the political experiences of Riel and the Métis by transforming them into an object of imaginative contemplation. The techniques of poetry are used, but for political, not truly artistic purposes. Broadly speaking, the same is true of most, if not quite all, of Riel's poetry after 1870. It is dominated either by politics or religion and does not constitute a true artistic refraction of experience. Even where it is technically sound, as it sometimes still is, it stands in service of other ends.

In retrospect, this is not surprising. Even in Riel's early poetry, where he was not consciously striving to advance a political or religious movement, there was a powerful didactic and moralistic vein. He was drawn to the fable genre because he saw it as a means of moral instruction. There is a world of difference between Riel's fables and those of his master, La Fontaine. The latter has a light ironic touch. In his fables, cleverness repeatedly triumphs over morality, whereas Riel's compositions are relentlessly moralistic. Evil is punished and goodness is rewarded, to the point where Gilles Martel has spoken of a "*conscience némésiaque*" in Riel's poems, an obsession with the retribution symbolized by the Greek goddess Nemesis (*Poésies de jeunesse*, pp. 36-39).

Riel's mentality can be illustrated through a comparison of one of his fables to a similar one by La Fontaine, which probably served as an inspiration for Riel's own composition: "Le Conseil tenu par les Rats." In La Fontaine's famous poem, a group of rats debate what to do about the cat who is terrorizing them. They agree that putting a bell around his neck would offer them some security, but the plan collapses because no rat is willing "to bell the cat." What a difference from Riel's "Le Chat et les Souris"! Here a group of mice determine finally to put an end to their oppression by the local cat. They make a surprise attack by night and succeed in putting out the cat's eyes, even though they suffer severe losses of their own. The mice: "Elles purent au moins savourer une fois / Les joies de la vengeance." And as for the cat, "Assurément personne ne peut croire / Ce qu'il souffrit. Il mourut enragé. / Le bon droit est ainsi toujours vengé (*Poésies de jeunesse*, p. 108). This one-dimensional moralism was characteristic of Riel even at his best in his youthful poetry. It is not surprising, therefore, that his artistry suffered as he grew older. Embroiled in political battles, ultimately coming to believe himself a divinely inspired prophet, he increasingly saw the world in black and white.¹⁸ Good and evil were locked in mortal combat: Métis against white, French against English, Catholic virtue against secular liberalism. True art cannot thrive in such a heightened mood of struggle and hostility, for individual human beings are reduced to stereotypes of good and evil, depending on where their allegiance falls. This is fertile soil for propaganda and evangelism but not for literary creation.

In the last analysis, I have to agree with the opinion of earlier students of Riel's life that his poetry was not of great merit. However, I would qualify that judgement by saying that out of five hundred or so pages of verse which have

been discovered, one could select enough to make a slender volume of some literary interest. I hope someone will undertake this task, once the entire corpus has been published in *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel / Les Ecrits complets de Louis Riel*. It will be necessary to publish the selected poems in a bilingual format, as English has replaced French as the first language of most Métis. If an English poet can be found to do justice to the translation, a small volume of selected poetry by Riel would help to establish the literary tradition which the Métis will need if they are to ensure their survival as a new nation in the modern world.

Appendix

Below are samples of Riel's poetry together with some comments. Thought not the very best – those are too long for presentation in this short paper – these poems are sufficient to give an idea of what Riel was capable of doing in various forms of poetry.

Le Renard et le chien

Un chien cherchait une proie.
Il tombe sur un canard
Qu'on venait de blesser. Au milieu de sa joie
Il allait le croquer, quand paraît un renard.
Pour le saisir, il met le premier en arrière,
Poursuit le fin coureur qui gagne sa tanière
Faisant maint et maint tout pour écarter Brifaut,
Dont les pieds et le museau
Furent de cette manière
Enfin mis en défaut.
Il perdit à la fois le Renard et l'oiseau.
Dans le train de la vie
Cette règle toujours devrait être suivie:

Vaut mieux simple avoir
Que plus grand espoir. (*Poésies de jeunesse*, p. 115)

“Le Renard et le chien” was composed, or at least recopied in final form, on 24 April 1865, about six weeks after Riel was expelled from the Collège de Montréal. He was then twenty years old. This poem is shorter than most of his animal fables but is, in other respects, typical. There is a simple, one-dimensional moral:

Vaut mieux simple avoir
Que plus grand espoir.

The syntax and vocabulary in the poem are simpler than in some of the other fables, but the language is nonetheless polished. Consider for example the line: “Poursuit le fin coureur qui gagne sa tanière.” The many back vowels slow

down the pronunciation, thus producing a vocal analogy to the extended chase the line describes. In the next line, the quickened rhythm of "maint et maint tour" aptly suggests the zig-zag course of the fox in flight. Effects such as these, which are often found in Riel's early poems, show that he had a talent for versification which went well beyond mechanical metre and rhyme.

Chanson
A mes amis

Voici que bientôt je vous laisse;
Je vais partir pour mon pays.
Si mon coeur est plein d'allégresse
Croyez qu'aussi j'ai des ennuis.
Car c'est parmi vous que la vie
M'a fait jouir de tant de biens
Et sur cette terre chérie
J'ai formé de si doux liens. (*bis*)

Maintenant lorsque je m'éloigne
L'amitié m'arrache des pleurs.
J'aime; et mon âme le témoigne
Pourtant malgré tant de faveurs
Je songe encore à ma patrie.
Car c'est là que sont tous les miens
Je veux voir ma mère chérie
Et c'est vers vous que je reviens. (*bis*)

En laissant la terre natale
L'absence était mon premier deuil.
Mais une pierre sépulcrale
A couvert depuis un cercueil
Celui qui m'a donné la vie
Est mort en bénissant mes jours
Je veux voir sa tombe chérie
Et je reviens à mes amours. (*bis*) (*Poésies de jeunesse*, p. 144)

This text was composed between 12 June and 19 June 1866. Riel had begun to read law in Montreal and was secretly engaged to a French Canadian girl, Marie-Julie Guernon. When they announced their plans to marry, the girl's parents forbade the match and Riel left Montreal immediately to return to the west. This song was a farewell composed on the eve of his departure. Although written under great emotion, the text is well controlled. It follows a logical progression from Riel's ties to his Montreal friends, to his desire to see his mother and relatives, to his wish to visit the grave of his father, who had died 21 January 1864. The vocabulary, metre and rhyme scheme were, I believe, intentionally and successfully kept simple. We can infer from our knowledge of Riel's life that the episode of the forbidden marriage was painful to him in the highest degree, signifying rejection by the white society of Montreal. Yet

here we see him trying to leave with graceful dignity from a city which has never fully accepted him as a Métis. Too proud to deal in racial recriminations, he invokes his family and fatherland as the reasons for his departure – a forgivable white lie under the circumstances. Taken in isolation, the text might be accused of banality but understood in context, it is a touching attempt by a young man to preserve his dignity and keep himself from the extremes of rancour or self-pity.

La Métisse

Je suis métisse et je suis orgueilleuse
 D'appartenir à cette nation
 Je sais que Dieu de sa main généreuse
 Fait chaque peuple avec attention.
 Les métis sont un petit peuple encore
 Mais vous pouvez voir déjà leurs destins
 Être haïs comme ils sont les honore.
 Ils ont déjà rempli de grands desseins.

Refrain:

Ah! si jamais je devais être aimée
 Je choisirais pour mon fidèle amant
 Un des soldats de la petite armée
 Que commandait notre fier adjudant
 Je choisirais un des soldats
 Que commandait notre fier adjudant.¹⁹

The above are the first verse and the chorus of a song composed by Riel probably not long after the events of 1869 and 1870. It is of special interest because the musical score has also been preserved, so it can be sung today as originally intended. It expresses in a moderate way Riel's nationalistic view of the Métis as a distinct people with a special historical destiny. Something of the polarized world view which later was so obvious in Riel's thinking is already visible here in the line "Être haïs comme ils sont les honore." As poetry, these lines react rather neutrally upon the reader. The image of the girl singing the praises of the Métis fighting men is conventional at best. The poet rhymes and scans properly, but the language is devoid of expressive metaphors or special effects.

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NOTES

- 1 The Native Council of Canada still claims to represent some Métis as well as non-status Indians. The Métis National Council represent primarily the Métis of the three prairie provinces.
- 2 Harry W. Daniels, *Native People and the Constitution of Canada* (Ottawa: Native Council of Canada, 1981), p. 8.

- 3 Figures given in background papers for Canadian First Ministers Conference, Ottawa, 15-16 Mar. 1983.
- 4 *The Constitution Act, 1982*, s. 25, 35. See also Thomas Flanagan, "The Case Against Métis Aboriginal Rights," *Canadian Public Policy*, forthcoming.
- 5 Maria Campbell, *Halfbreed* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979).
- 6 J.O. Mousseau, *Une Page d'histoire* (Montréal: Daniel, 1886), pp. 7-8.
- 7 G.F.G. Stanley, *Louis Riel* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1963), p. 26.
- 8 J.K. Howard, *Strange Empire* (New York: William Morrow, 1952), p. 355.
- 9 G.H. Needler, *Louis Riel: The Rebellion of 1885* (Toronto: Burns and MacEachern, 1957), p. 76.
- 10 Louis "David" Riel, *Poésies religieuses et politiques* (Montreal: L'Imprimerie de l'Étendard, 1886).
- 11 Gilles Martel, Glen Campbell, Thomas Flanagan, *Louis Riel: Poésies de jeunesse* (St. Boniface, Manitoba: Les Éditions du Blé, 1977). Further references are incorporated in the text.
- 12 To be published by the University of Alberta Press. The poetry will be edited by Glen Campbell.
- 13 See *Poésies de jeunesse*, pp. 130-35, and Thomas Flanagan and John Yardley, "Louis Riel as a Latin Poet," *Humanities Association Review*, 26 (1975), pp. 33-45.
- 14 Louis Riel, undated manuscript, Public Archives of Canada, RG 13 B 2, 2210, emphasis added.
- 15 Louis Riel, undated manuscript, Public Archives of Canada, 2318, emphasis added.
- 16 Public Archives of Canada, MG 27 I C 4, 2097-98.
- 17 "A Sir John A. Macdonald," *Poésies religieuses et politiques*, pp. 37-51.
- 18 See Glen Campbell, "The Political Party of Louis Riel: A Semiotic Study," *Canadian Poetry*, No. 3 (1978), pp. 14-25.
- 19 Provincial Archives of Manitoba, MG 14 B 26, file 8. Published with the score and an English translation in Margaret A. MacLeod, *Songs of Old Manitoba* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1959), pp. 52-55.

Canada's Forgotten People: The Métis in Nineteenth-century Fiction and Drama

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WOLFGANG KLOOSS

When the twenty-ninth International Congress of Americanists met in Chicago in 1951, John Perry Pritchett gave a paper on "Historical Aspects of the Canadian Métis," which he concluded with the following remarks:

The métis as a nation are gone. However, while they grew and thrived as a distinct people, they played a role never insignificant or ignoble, but often