

10 Jan 197

St. Thomas history teacher provides further interpretation of Riel events

Wayne Paddon, head of the history department at Arthur Voaden Secondary School and co-author of a secondary school and university text book called "Approaches to Teaching Local History" has made available further interesting information on Louis Riel and the Red River Rebellion.

In a letter to the editor, Mr. Paddon wrote:

I was very impressed by a recent story which your paper ran concerning Louis Riel's role in the Red River Rebellion; the story was in connection with the Manitoba Centennial of this year. The enigmatic personality of Riel and the pathetic aspects of his life have been well told by several famous Canadian historians, and I hope that the story which you carried will act as motivation for considerable further reading by many of your subscribers. Could I add a few more lines of interpretation to the last part of the Riel story?

Mr. Paddon writes as follows:

The Red River Rebellion of 1869 not only forced the New Dominion Government to allow Manitoba into Confederation as a province rather than as a territory, but it virtually guaranteed that Manitoba would have all the bicultural rights which had earlier been granted to Quebec in 1867. It was Riel who insisted on Manitoba receiving full provincial status. If Thomas Scott had not been executed, Louis Riel, the Metis leader would certainly now be considered a great national hero.

A HUNTED MAN

Although hostilities at Red River completely ended in 1870, Riel who had been promised amnesty by the Macdonald government was a hunted man with a huge price on his head. Before Macdonald could solve the problem of the amnesty, his government fell from power. In 1873 a Royal Commission proved that Sir John A. as well as Sir Etienne Cartier had accepted over \$100,000 for election campaign funds from a wealthy Montreal capitalist,

Sir Hugh Allan. Unfortunately Allan was attempting to secure a contract to build the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway at the time. The "Pacific Scandal" enabled the Liberal party to take power in 1874.

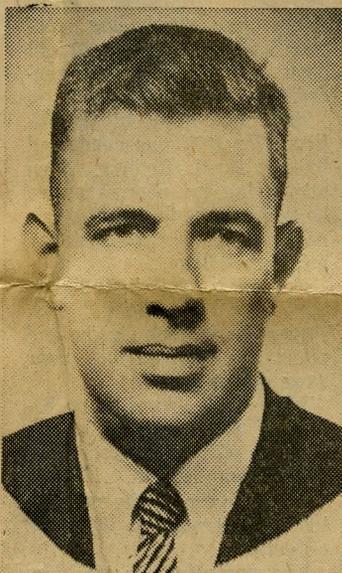
It was this Liberal Government and Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie who reluctantly granted amnesty to those who participated in the hostilities in the West. Riel and two other leaders of the Metis were also banished from Canada for five years. In February 1875 Mackenzie's motion appeared to end the Riel matter.

Many people thought that John A. Macdonald was finished in politics. But a severe depression and failure by the Liberals to improve economic conditions brought the conservatives and their leader, "Old Tomorrow," back to the government helm in 1878. The wily old Macdonald had recognized a need for protection for developing Canadian industry and he rode to power on the promise of a "National Policy."

The 'old chief' knew he had one more chance to make good his promise at Confederation to unite Canada from sea to sea. The transcontinental railway alone could do this. The Mackenzie government had made very little headway in railway construction and in 1881 Macdonald convinced the Canadian parliament that the successful building of the railway could be managed by the private syndicate which George Stephen had organized. The work began.

YEAR OF CRISIS

The year 1884 was the year of crisis for both the Macdonald Conservative government and the CPR. The Stephen Syndicate was on the verge of bankruptcy and the promises of new prosperity made by Sir John in 1878 and 1882 had failed to materialize. It was at this point in history when word came that Riel had returned to Canada to organize the Metis and plains Indians of Saskatchewan for a war against Canada.



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But Riel had not counted on the speed by which Ottawa could now despatch troops to the west. Using the completed sections of the CPR, Canadian troops reached the Saskatchewan via Winnipeg in less than three weeks. Riel's delusion of establishing a utopia for misplaced people with himself as king and pope was crushed, "David," as Riel now called himself, was quickly arrested. The year was 1885. The railway had proven itself, and, shortly, with increased government aid and with enhanced credit abroad, was successfully completed. Macdonald's promise had been fulfilled.

In retrospect the political and cultural aftermath was devastating. The execution of Riel divided Canada into "English" and "French-Canadian" political camps. The French-Canadian burnt in effigy the bodies of the Conservative French-Canadian cabinet ministers who had acquiesced to Macdonald's decision not to reverse the verdict of the Western courts to hang Riel (the Privy Council in England did not recommend leniency either). The Conservative party lost its support in Quebec from this time on, and a radical provincial Quebec government

led by Honore Mercier was soon elected. Mercier's policy of extreme French-Canadian nationalism laid the foundation for continued cultural conflict. It was a direct reaction to Ontario's condemnation of Catholic French-Canada personified by Louis Riel.

There were many French-Canadians who would never put Quebec above nation; but a basis for ethnic conflict had been laid which would have serious constitutional repercussions later. Sir John A. never believed the Riel execution would have such a lasting effect on Canadian Nationalism; but it must be accepted as fact that he did to a considerable degree sacrifice the Metis leader for Ontario political support.

If we are to learn a valuable lesson from history we should not be too quick to condemn either events or people of the past, nor to glorify them. Many of the unfortunate developments in Canadian history were brought on by political expediency. Surely we all should be adamant about this development not continuing. Justice tempered with mercy still appears sound advice in the long run. Perhaps if we learn a little more about the Canadian story we can guarantee it.