

CANADA'S CRISIS : A NEW LOOK  
AT THE RIEL REBELLION OF 1885 .

by

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It is sometimes interesting to speculate on the chances of history, not only because of the intriguing thought that things might have turned out very differently, but because of the implication that this idea carries with it. It is the implication that, while not everything is possible, much more is possible than we had imagined; that the future really does depend on what we do now, on the goals we set for ourselves, and the active steps we take to reach these goals. It is the implication that history is not on the side of the drifters or the mere dreamers, but is on the side of those who strive to turn their dreams into history. It is an implication that should have special meaning for Canada today, at this time of decision.

That is why it is not simply a futile exercise to consider once again the case of Louis Riel and what might have been the consequence of his winning, instead of losing, the Northwest Rebellion of 1885. Such an inquiry would be a waste of time if Riel's chances of winning were as remote as most people have thought they were. But close examination of the facts indicates that his defeat was not by any means inevitable, and that, on the contrary, he was probably closer to gaining his objective than he himself knew.

The feeling that Riel was doomed arose in the first place with the rapid mobilization of troops in Upper and Lower Canada numbering over 5,000, not counting auxiliaries, and not counting the Northwest Mounted Police Force of 500 men. The mobilization took place with a tremendous clatter of arms and bustling

about of officers. Camps were set up outside many of the townships, trumpets blared and drums rattled, and the newspapers were filled with splendid talk. On top of all this was the apparent professionalism of General Middleton and his staff. Middleton acted with calm, resolution and despatch. Ten days after the opening shots were fired at Duck Lake, he was in Fort Qu'Appelle prepared to march his troops to the Saskatchewan. At the same time, it must be admitted that some of the eagerness with which the Canadians awaited the coming campaign was based on ill-founded beliefs concerning their opponent.

One of these was the belief that the Metis were a violent, lawless breed who richly deserved to be "put down". They were pictured staggering about the Prairies drunk, and firing off their rifles out of mere hellishness. Was not the Red River proof enough that this was a vicious race? Had they not captured Fort Garry, lowered the Union Jack, and rudely treated the Queen's representative near Pembina? Had Riel not taken Scott out into the snow and shot him in cold blood while the renegades looked on? And now here they were in Saskatchewan calling upon Riel to lead them once again, threatening again to lower the old flag and to declare a Provisional Government. They had to be taught a lesson.

This picture of irresponsible violence is, of course, wilfully one-sided. It ignores the accounts of early travellers who found the Metis honest and hospitable. It ignores the fact that until the arrival of the immigrants to Upper Canada, the Red River community, a mixture of English, Scots and halfbreeds, lived at peace with itself. But this peace was shattered soon after the Canadian Party, as it was called, came on the scene. George Stanley, the leading historian of the Rebellion, is quite clear about this. The Red River Rebellion, in his view, was brought on by the actions of the Canadians, whose sole interest was to open the land for white settlement from Upper Canada. Little thought was wasted on the half-breed population which already occupied the area. The fact that it was thought to be vicious and lawless of the Metis to resist the Canadian surveyors who, without notice or explanation of intent, were laying chains across their lands and marking

radically new boundaries, all in the name of an unheard of place called Ottawa, gives some indication of the blind prejudice and ignorance of the Upper Canadians. The weight of the evidence is that the Metis did not choose to rebel, either at Red River or in Saskatchewan; they were driven to rebellion.

Another belief entertained by the Canadians was that the Metis were a primitive, backward race, little above the level of Indians, and were therefore destined to fall before the onward march of civilization -- namely Upper Canada. It is true that the Metis were less settlers and farmers than they were, for a long time, wanderers and hunters, and they no doubt exhibited many of the traits of nomads. Most of them were uneducated, many illiterate, and they passed the long winters in song and festivity. It was probably this last characteristic that most annoyed the solemn people from Ontario, and largely accounts for the tales of "savagery". The Earl of Southesk who travelled among them as early as the 1860's did not find them savage :

"Too many people at home have formed a false idea of the half-breeds, imagining them to be a race little removed from the barbarians in habits and appearance...I doubt if a half-breed, dressed and educated like an Englishman, would seem at all remarkable in London society. They build and farm like other people, they go to church and courts of law ... and in all respects they are like civilized men, not more uneducated, immoral, or disorderly than many communities in the Old World."

It suited the Canadians to think otherwise. They needed both the belief that the Metis were violent and lawless, and the belief that they were ignorant and backward, in order to completely justify the war. It would make the troops more eager for combat to know that these easy-going people would not stand up to the repeater rifles, Gatling machine guns and field artillery of an advanced civilization. It would make the troops also better able to fire into Metis villages if they knew that these were a violent people, and deserved their punishment.

Aside from these psychological conditioners, there were some solid grounds for prosecuting the war with enthusiasm. In 1885 the Metis of Saskatchewan, from an orthodox military standpoint, occupied a weaker position than in 1869.

Whereas at Red River they had lived in a few closely related communities, the Metis of Saskatchewan were widely scattered in a number of small villages. This lack of geographical cohesiveness would be a serious handicap when it came to organizing the rebellion. Furthermore, the half-breeds were divided into French and English. Though the English half-breeds had always recognized an identity of interests with the Metis, differences of race, religion, and language posed problems even at Red River. The dispersed nature of the half-breed community in Saskatchewan would tend to widen these differences, hamper communications, and hinder the execution of a coordinated military strategy.

Fully aware of the Metis problems, the Canadian and Imperial officers devised a strategy that would take maximum advantage of them. The plan would work on two interrelated levels, military and political. The military plan aimed at preventing the juncture of the three main rebel bodies and smashing them one at a time. Three widely separated columns were to strike at the centers of rebellion. The first column was to move under General Strange through the country of the Blackfeet, as a warning to this once most warlike of Plains tribes, and then turn East at Edmonton to attack Big Bear's Crees in the region of Fort Pitt. The second column, under Colonel Otter, was to march north from Swift Current to Battleford in order to relieve that garrison beleaguered by Chief Poundmaker's Indians. The third and strongest force would advance from Fort Qu'Appelle under Middleton's command direct on Riel's headquarters at Batoche. The military plan depended on speed of execution, on crushing the rebellion before it had a chance of inflaming the Northwest.

The political features of the plan also needed to be put swiftly into operation. In order to prevent the disaffection from spreading to the English half-breeds of Saskatchewan, to the Metis of the Qu'Appelle valley, and to the Blackfeet of Southern Alberta, a show of force in these areas was combined with an increase in rations of meat, tea and tobacco. This policy worked. The English half-breeds stayed on their farms. Down in the Qu'Appelle valley the Metis were,

for the moment, overawed by the presence of soldiers. The Blackfeet remained quiet, seeking to gain concessions from the Government in its moment of discomfiture, but watchful, awaiting the outcome of the initial military operation.

It was the threat of a general Indian uprising that particularly concerned the Government. Within living memory the Sioux had risen in Minnesota and slaughtered many of the white settlers. Though the Metis could not muster more than a thousand men under arms, twenty thousand Indians roamed the northern plains, or rather had roamed them until urged into reservations by promises that had never been fulfilled. Their attempts at farming failed, the meat rations were reduced to starvation level, and the Indian Department wondered at the demoralization of its charges. The winters of 1883 and 1884 were periods of deprivation, disease and despair for Indians who had once hunted the Prairies freely and successfully. But the buffalo were gone and the proud men who had hunted them were reduced to begging for a bit of cow's meat. Few white men could appreciate the depths of their humiliation and bitterness. For the moment they felt hopeless, but their hopes might be revived.

The reasons for the optimism that prevailed in the glowing militia camps and the offices alight on Parliament Hill, appear overwhelming. How, then, could Riel expect a community of a few thousand people to take on the burgeoning young might of Canada, and force it to come to terms?

There are those who have argued that Riel was mad. Certainly he had visions and, as he called them, "feelings about the future". Perhaps on this account he was unfit to lead the Northwest through the crisis of 1885. However, other leaders have seen visions and gone on to victory; Louis Riel's trouble was that his dreams obscured his perceptions.

Riel had on his side his enemy's weaknesses, political and military. The military operation was well conceived, but poorly carried out. Middleton marched in regular army fashion straight to the main objective, in order to win a decisive battle and hoist the Union Jack over Batoche. He had to march with

untried troops in unfamiliar country unprotected by an effective force of cavalry, yet he was allowed to approach almost to the gates of Batoche without opposition. Even then his progress was slow. Had he suffered the constant harrassment that Gabriel Dumont, the Metis military leader, had planned for him, it is doubtful that he would have made it to Batoche. Very likely he would have withdrawn to await substantial reinforcements, a conclusion borne out by his actions after Fish Creek, where he received a check from Dumont's men. Then he waited two full weeks before advancing again on Batoche. Even if he had reached Batoche after the relentless guerrilla harrassment planned by Dumont, it would have been in a greatly weakened condition and long after the date set for him. And Time was the vital factor in the Government's plan. One mistake that Middleton made, which put his whole operation in jeopardy, was at Clarke's Crossing on the South Saskatchewan. Here, he divided his force of 800 men into two halves and marched them parallel to one another on either side of the river. Nor, until they reached Dumont's Crossing had they any way of joining up again. Not only did these forces, marching along the river bank, present prime targets for Dumont's rifles, but here, when Middleton had reduced his effective force by one half, was the opportunity for a full-scale attack by the Metis, if any was to be made.

Dumont, however, had been held in check by Riel. As a result, after the indecisive skirmishing at Fish Creek, the battle was fought that ended the rebellion, and Batoche fell. Unfortunately, Riel had not perceived the weaknesses in the Government's military operation.

Perhaps his failure of perception arose from his misunderstanding of the Government's political position, which could not have endured a protracted war. No doubt he thought of war romantically in terms of decisive battles, God giving the victory. Consequently, he boxed himself in, and committed his men to a battle they were ill prepared to fight. What he hoped, and prayed for, was that a show of force would bring the just grievances of the Metis to the attention of responsible Ministers. All that he wanted, or the Metis wanted, after the years of endless petitions to Ottawa,

was for someone to pay attention and to understand that the Metis indeed had just grievances. If this was his intention, and the weight of the evidence seems to indicate that it was, then he sadly mistook his principal antagonist, John A. Macdonald, who understood the language of strength, not of weakness; who could be forced to the bargaining table, not persuaded to it. In Gabriel Dumont's kind of war the government would have been unable to gain a decisive victory; the chances of the rebellion spreading would have mounted alarmingly; and in the face of these consequences and of other wider, political pressures, Macdonald would have had little choice but to negotiate.

The question then arises whether the Metis were capable of waging the kind of warfare which Dumont planned for them. What is surprising is that, fighting a positional warfare, for which they were least suited, their numbers sharply reduced by desertion, firing antiquated weapons, they were yet able to hold back for so many days, and even, at moments, drive back, regular troops who outnumbered them three to one, who were armed with up-to-date weapons, and were supported by artillery. Part of the explanation, of course, was in the incredible caution of Middleton. But there was reason for Middleton's caution besides a distrust of the Canadian troops and the natural stolidity of an Imperial officer. The larger reason is that the Metis under Dumont fought with intelligence and effect. Their small arms fire was so deadly that they were able to fend off one assault after another, an effectiveness explained not only by accurate marksmanship, but also by their clever use of cover -- an art in which the Metis excelled. They knew how to fire from cover, how rapidly to change position and fire again, thus making the enemy feel that he was facing a far larger force than he in fact did face. In any other situation than in the fixed defence of Batoche, Dumont's methods, fluid and adaptable, would have worked indefinitely as well as effectively. As matters stood, Middleton and the Canadians merely had to wait before Batoche, keeping up the pressure until the Metis had fired off all their ammunition. To have chosen to fight in this way was for the Metis to choose defeat.

Dumont knew what his men were capable of -- they were buffalo hunters, fine horsemen, expert shots, extremely tough and resourceful, able to endure without complaint hardships that sharply lowered the efficiency of white men. W.B. Cheadle, journeying across Canada in 1862, had this to say about their qualities of endurance :

"Day after day with plenty of food or none at all, whether pack on back..or treading out a path with snowshoes in the deep snow for the sleigh dogs, or running after them at a racing pace from morning to night...(the Metis)... travel fifty or sixty miles a day for a week together without showing any sign of fatigue."

Here were a people capable of living in and off the country in a way which the white men were not, and therefore capable of waging a mobile, non-positional, hit-and-run warfare for an indefinite period. "We will fight them", Dumont once had said, "as we used to hunt the buffalo." By stealth, by speed, by gunmanship, by surprise, they would fight them. It was not necessary, Dumont knew, for the Metis to win a conclusive victory over the whites; it was only necessary to prevent the whites from winning such a victory.

This type of war was especially suited to the Indians. Strongly influenced by the half-breeds as they were, the Indians would soon learn what could be attempted when their natural mobile tactics were used on a larger planned scale than they had ever thought possible. Then the Northwest, from Red River to the Rockies, from Cypress to the Touchwood Hills, would come alive again with the old tribes -- Crees and Stonies, Ojibways and Blackfeet -- moving freely yet in conjunction with the Metis bands. If Macdonald refused to bargain they would sweep the white men from the western plains.

It might be argued that such a war would in the end be no more successful for the Indians and half-breeds of the Northwest than the American Indian uprisings had been in an earlier period. However, the differences are significant. For one thing, the American Indians faced a sudden influx of many thousands of settlers. They were unable to organize an effective resistance in time. Divided by tribal jealousies, short of food and ammunition, travelling in nomadic array with all their dependants, forced to keep far from the settled areas, they fell prey to the



rapidly moving columns of U.S. Cavalry.

It should be noted, however, that on the few occasions when they were led intelligently, they were able not only to outrun, but often to outfight, crack U.S. Cavalry units. Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, Sitting Bull of the Sioux, Geronimo of the Apaches, were finally defeated only at great cost. Still, these were tribal efforts, which could only delay the white tide, not stop it.

In British North America the situation was different. There was not a flood of immigration to the Northwest, quickly filling up the valleys and establishing populous towns. The immigration from Upper Canada was a rivulet, not a flood, that came upon a half-breed population already settling large areas. With the disappearance of the buffalo, the Indians had been persuaded by the representatives of the Great White Mother to sign treaties with the Queen's men at Ottawa, and enter upon a reservation life. They did so reluctantly, having never been defeated in a major battle.

Furthermore, the Canadian Government was in no position to send large permanent cavalry forces into the Northwest because Ottawa had nothing like the military resources and trained manpower available to the U.S. Government following the Civil War. In 1885 Canada was suffering a major economic recession and could ill-afford the military preparations which she had been forced to carry forward in the Northwest Rebellion.

Finally, the U.S. had nothing comparable to the large indigent population of half-breeds that inhabited the former territory of the Hudson's Bay Company. And the half-breeds were an important factor, because they formed the natural unifying center around which the Indians north of the border could cluster, looking for and expecting leadership in their confrontation with the whites.

It was precisely such a junction between the Crees of the North Saskatchewan and Riel's Metis that the Canadians sought to prevent in the military operation of April, 1885. That the Indians were willing to fight was shown by the rebuff handed to Otter's men at Cut Knife Creek where the Indians were outnumbered, and by the check given to General Strange's soldiers at Frenchman's Butte. Chiefs Poundmaker and Big Bear

were on the way to Batoche to assist Riel, but failed to arrive in time. As a result, the principal rebels were cut down one at a time, as the Canadians had hoped. But for a while this outcome was uncertain.

The political weakness of the Canadian government has been mentioned, but not explained. Macdonald's principal problems were the United States and Quebec. Macdonald feared American designs on the Northwest for the good reason that powerful interests in and out of <sup>the U.S.</sup> government were anxious to detach the Northwest from Canada at the first opportunity. Macdonald must not give them the opportunity, especially since Riel was not averse to making representations in Washington. The other problem was Quebec. Public opinion in French Canada sided with the Riel of 1885 as it had with the Riel of 1870, and the longer the war went on the stronger would grow the pressure on Macdonald to reach an accord.

What kind of compromise was possible? Macdonald not only had Quebec to worry about but also the English Protestant sentiment of Ontario. He could not abandon the Canadian claim to the Northwest without committing political suicide. Whatever agreement was worked out with Riel's government, Macdonald would have to be assured of the form, if not the full substance, of Ottawa's power. Provincial status with specific guarantees protecting Metis and Indians against alienation of their land would surely have been acceptable to Macdonald.

But Riel would have had to demand more than guaranteed land rights if he was to ensure the survival of the Metis community. Somehow he would have to check the onrolling white immigration. Perhaps the wisest course for Riel's government would have been to insist that immigration involve equal numbers of French and English Canadians. This provision would have served to keep down the total immigration, at least for a time, long enough for the half-breeds and Indians to establish their claim in the Province. It would have ensured also the racial mixing that had prevailed in the old days of the Northwest, and it would have prevented the ascendancy of the English Protestant element, which meant death to the Metis and Indian societies.

This policy would have had most interesting results. Canada's central problem today, as it was in the days of the Macdonald government, is the French-English dichotomy, which is heightened by the feeling of the Quebecois that they are isolated in a continent-wide Anglo-Saxon society. Would they have had this feeling if the West had been settled by as many French Canadians as English Canadians? Riel's success might have had that result. Perhaps it would have made Les Canadiens feel that the whole country belonged as much to them as it belonged to Les Anglais. And what of the English speaking Canadians? Would Riel's solution not have made them feel more strongly their identity with Canada, and therefore less like drifting into a final embrace with the United States? Bilingualism in a racially mixed society would have been a practical, not merely a political, necessity. And the resulting sense of a shared, rather than opposed, culture might have provided that awareness of national difference which is the foundation of national pride. Riel's success might have helped establish the sense of a Canadian identity.