

*Louis Riel and the Métis people: creating an everlasting identity through the  
Rebellions of 1870 and 1885.*



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There are many people within Canadian history who have made an impact on the country as a whole or an individual province. Louis Riel is one who has done both. Having his beginnings in the Red River Settlement, Louis Riel would grow up to become known as the 'Father of Manitoba' and would be an influential leader for the Métis people. His impact however would not just be within present-day Manitoba but also felt across the entire country of Canada.

Even 125 years after the death of Louis Riel, there are still controversial ideas about how he should be viewed for his role in Canadian history. There are divides all across the country; whether by language or ethnicity, there are some who view him as a hero and others who see him as a traitor. Yet he was so much more than just a hero or a traitor, in fact he was both. Louis Riel was a complicated, enigmatic man who held many positions and roles in his lifetime. He was the leader of the provincial government for the Métis people in present-day Manitoba, a school teacher in Montana, and a leader of the North-West Rebellion in present-day Saskatchewan.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, in the territories that would eventually become the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the Métis formed a significant portion of the population. In these areas, the Métis consisted primarily of those who had both Indian<sup>1</sup> and French-Canadian/European blood. In order to assert their cultural and political rights the Métis people required organization and formal leadership. Louis Riel, with his messianic vision, became the leader that would fill that void and help form a culture that would unify the Métis across Canada. It is through his efforts that present-day Métis in the west are able to carry on their culture and identity. Without Louis Riel, it is possible that they could have faded in

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<sup>1</sup> In the current constitution, Native is used as an umbrella term which includes: Indians, Inuits, and Métis. This paper will use the term Indian when referring to those of Aboriginal descent in the Sub-Artic region of Canada (present day Northern Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec and Yukon, Northwest, and Nunavut Territories), and Native as encompassing all Aboriginals.

obscurity when the Canadian government began expanding their newly formed country in the north west.

### *Who are the Métis?*

In order to understand what the people of the Red River Settlement, in present-day Manitoba, and Batoche, in present-day Saskatchewan, were willing to fight, it is important to understand who they were as a people.

The French had laid claim to the land where the Red River Settlement sprang up, until 1763, when the Treaty of Paris was signed and all French Canadian lands were ceded to the British.<sup>2</sup> Yet the French were not done with the area. They began forcing their way into “Rupert’s Land” and tried to cut off the English fur supply. Thus a rivalry between Montreal and London was on, and would last until 1821.<sup>3</sup> The alliances that the French and English European traders, and their companies, forged with the Indian population would bring into existence the Métis people.<sup>4</sup> By 1874, when a plan for the new city of Winnipeg was created, the Red River Settlement was no longer taken into consideration. St. Boniface did, however, occupy all of the area east of the Red River and south-west of the Assiniboine, assimilating the Red River Settlement. The city of Winnipeg was to occupy the north-west area<sup>5</sup>. Present-day Winnipeg now encompasses all of the area around the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. The Métis who did not want to be assimilated into the country of Canada, eventually made their way west into present-day Saskatchewan, settling in the Batoche and Duck-Lake areas. When Europeans came onto Indian

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<sup>2</sup> Sawchuk, *The Metis of Manitoba: Reformulation of an ethnic identity*. (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1978) 19.

<sup>3</sup> Sawchuk, *The Metis of Manitoba*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Sawchuk, *The Metis of Manitoba*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Artibise, Alan F.J. and Edward H. Dahl. *Winnipeg in Maps: 1816-1972*. (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada and National Map Collections, 1974), 16.

lands, they would often create ties with the Indian population through marriages. From these unions, half Native and half-European children were the product.<sup>6</sup> The Red River Valley was the central battle area of the Hudson Bay Company and the Northwest Company and it is through the inter-breeding of the Indians and Europeans that the Métis nation came into existence.<sup>7</sup>

The definition of a Métis is a person who has both Indian and non-Indian, usually French European, blood. The constitution states that: a person is considered an Indian because they were Indian before the constitution was drafted.<sup>8</sup> This included the Métis as they were not considered Indian because of their mixed blood. This is due to the fact that Indian ancestry or cultural heritage does not, by itself, offer guarantee of legal recognition by the federal government.<sup>9</sup> In the 1985 Constitution, Métis and Inuit's were included as Natives in Canada and the term Indians became a way to distinguish between the three groups.<sup>10</sup>

According to the British North American Act of 1867, an Indian was an Indian because they were Indian before the Act was put into effect. This circular definition of an Indian often leads to problems because there were certain groups, like the Métis, who were not considered Indian at the conception of the Act. "In a sense all Métis can be regarded as non-status Indians, in as much as they have a recognized Indian background and are not registered under the Indian Act."<sup>11</sup> They did not have a proper place in society because they were not Indian, European, or Canadian, but rather an amalgamation of all three.

Métis do not have status under the Indian Act, unless their Indian parent was their father, and even then, many Métis were still not granted status because of their mixed blood. They were

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<sup>6</sup> Sawchuk, *The Metis of Manitoba*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Sawchuk, *The Metis of Manitoba*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Sawchuk, Joe. *The Metis of Manitoba*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Sawchuk, Joe. *The Metis of Manitoba*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Sawchuk, Joe. *The Metis of Manitoba*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Sawchuk, Joe. *The Metis of Manitoba*, 6.

not recognized by the tribe. In an article by Denis Gagnon, he gives an explanation about how a person is identified as Métis: "...these are the criteria for determining identification: a person must have an ancestral root (which includes adoption) with Native blood, by auto-identification, and by acceptance of the individual by the people."<sup>12</sup> Originally the term Métis referred to only the children of French European men and Indian women. A more modern take on the term broadens the definition to be any person of mix European and Aboriginal decent.<sup>13</sup> It was written into the Indian Act, at its conception, that women who married and/or bore children to non-Indians would automatically lose their status.<sup>14</sup> This was not changed until Bill C-31 in 1985, in which Indian women who married non-Indian men had their status reinstated, as well as that of their children. Most recently the Canadian government has extended this privilege to the grandchildren of such unions.<sup>15</sup>

One of the reason clarification about status and identification of Natives is needed, is because of the special lands that were set aside for Natives and any special rights they may have.<sup>16</sup> When the government began putting land aside for reserves and stating that only "status Indians" could live on them, they had to make sure that there were guidelines put in place for those who could and could not live on the reserves.<sup>17</sup>

"The 1996 change from ancestry to identity as the basis for Aboriginal rights excluded significant numbers of people previously considered Aboriginal. Also it

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<sup>12</sup> Gagnon Denis. "La nation metisse, les autre metis et le metissage: les paradoxes de la contingence indentitaire" *Anthropologie et societies*. Vol. 30, no. 1, 2006. p. 180-186. "Concernant les critères de définition identitaire, selon l'article 35, l'appartenance à un peuple autochtone est déterminée par le lien familial ancestral (ce qui inclut l'adoption), par l'auto-identification, et par l'acceptation del'individu par le people." (This quote was translated from its original French into English by the author of this essay, with help from Fran Greaves.)

<sup>13</sup> Barber, Katherine, ed. *Concise Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, (Don Mills: oxford University Press, 2005), 841.

<sup>14</sup> Sayers, Judith F. et al. *First Nations Women, Governance and the Indian Act: A collection of Policy Research Reports*. Ottawa: Status of Women Canada, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> CBC News, "Indian Status coming for thousands of Canadians." March 10<sup>th</sup> 2010,<<http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2010/03/10/native-status.html>> (March, 12th 2010)

<sup>16</sup> *Aboriginal people in Manitoba*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Aboriginal people in Manitoba*, 25.

included for the first time, significant numbers that were previously not considered to be Aboriginal, while some were ascribed the wrong Aboriginal group, this included non-Status Indians as well as Métis.”<sup>18</sup>

### *Introducing Louis Riel*

Louis ‘David’ Riel was born on either October 22<sup>nd</sup> or 23<sup>rd</sup> 1844. The real date of his birth is uncertain as the records were lost in a fire and there are conflicting reports from Riel and his mother Julie.<sup>19</sup> He was born in St. Boniface near the Red River Settlement, which is located where modern day Winnipeg sits. His maternal great grandmother was a full blond Chipewyan Indian. This would give Riel 1/8<sup>th</sup> Indian and 7/8<sup>th</sup> European blood, thus confirming his Métis status.

The records of Louis Riel's baptism were lost in the fire that consumed his birth record, so there is no definite way to tell what his full name was aside from the few documents in which he signed them J.B.A Louis Riel.<sup>20</sup> There is speculation that the 'J.B' stood for Jean-Baptist, the name of his grandfather but there is no proof.<sup>21</sup> It is widely accepted, however, that ‘David’ was not a name given to him by his parents.<sup>22</sup> In fact the name 'David' does not make an appearance until Riel is over thirty and it was a self baptismal name, which he always put in quotations to show its importance.<sup>23</sup> The name ‘David’ is also used to distinguish between Louis Riel, leader of the Red River Rebellion, and his father, who was also named Louis Riel.

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<sup>18</sup> *Aboriginal people in Manitoba*, 26.

<sup>19</sup> Flanagan, Thomas. *Louis “David” Riel: ‘Prophet of the New World’*. (Halifax: Goodread Biographies, 1983), 4.

<sup>20</sup> Flanagan, “Louis Riel’s’ name ‘David’.”, 54.

<sup>21</sup> Flanagan, “Louis Riel’s’ name ‘David’.”, 54.

<sup>22</sup> Flanagan, Thomas. *Louis “David” Riel: ‘Prophet of the New World’*. Halifax: Goodread Biographies, 1983. Also see: Stanley, G.F.G. *Louis Riel: Patriot or Rebel*. Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1964.; Roux, Jean Louis. *Bois-brûlé: reportage épique sur Louis Riel*. Montreal: , .

<sup>23</sup> Flanagan, “Louis Riel’s’ name ‘David’.”, 55.

From early on in his life, Louis was surrounded by religion. He was baptized Roman Catholic and when he was seven he was sent to Montreal to attend the Collège de Montréal. He never finished his studies at the College before embarking on travels that would take him all over the Eastern United States. In his ten year absence from Red River and St. Boniface, Louis Riel travelled to Chicago and St. Paul, often staying with relatives or friends of the family while he travelled. It would be 1868, when he finally returned to Red River.<sup>24</sup>

After Riel arrived back home, relations between the Métis and Indians of the Red River Settlement, and the Europeans were becoming tense. The Hudson Bay Company sold the Red River land to the Canadian government, which would have taken effect December 1<sup>st</sup> of 1869. They sold it, though they did not own it.<sup>25</sup> The surveyors reached the Red River Settlement in October of 1869. It was not that there were strange “Canadian” men in their settlement that upset those who made their home in Red River, but it was the fact that these men had no regard for the existing boundaries of the land.<sup>26</sup> It was clear to the Métis that if they could not respect the boundaries already set up, that they would not respect the people who were living on the land either.<sup>27</sup> In order to dissuade the Canadian government from coming into the North-West Territory, often referred to as ‘Rupert’s Land’, Louis Riel and the Métis of the Red River Settlement mounted a pre-emptive strike. They seized Fort Garry, in early November of 1869, holding those within captive over the winter months because the Canadian government could not mobilize any help until the following spring.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>“Louis Riel Biography: Montreal” *The Heritage Centre/La société historique de Sainte-Boniface*.  
<<http://www.shsb.mb.ca/Riel/emontreal.htm>> (Dec. 10th 2010)

<sup>25</sup> Sawchuk, Joe. *The Metis of Manitoba*, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Canada and the Public Archives of Canada. *The Birth of Manitoba*. (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1970),10.

<sup>27</sup> *Birth of Manitoba*,10.

<sup>28</sup> Flanagan, Louis “David” Riel,29.

There were several attempts by Canadians and their allied to take back the Fort, most notably in December 1869 and February 1870. On March 4<sup>th</sup> 1870, Thomas Scott, an Orangemen who was imprisoned in the Fort, was executed on Riel's orders after his escape and role in the resistance against the Métis. When people in other parts of the country received this news, there were two different sentiments and it was often split by language. The French and Indian populations revered Riel for his bravery against the Canadian government while the English portrayed him as a brute.<sup>29</sup> This would be a pivotal moment for the Métis as the Canadian government demonization their people because of their insurrection against the government who was attempting to take over their land. With this error in judgment, on Riel's part, he made the relations even more strenuous between the Métis and the white Europeans.<sup>30</sup> Louis Riel would be especially affected by the media of the Red River Rebellion and it would be something that followed him the rest of his life.

Once the armies were at the gates of Fort Garry, Riel did not put up a fight. By the time the army made it to For Garry, the Manitoba Act had been assented on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1870. It would bring the fifth, and first bilingual, province into Canadian confederacy.<sup>31</sup> Not only would this mean the province would have to conform to a centralized government, as they could lose the rights to their own land. Louis Riel and the provisional government had tried to take steps to avoid such an outcome when they sent a list of demands to the Ottawa. The Manitoba Act of 1870 was designed to let the Métis keep some of the land they were already living on, their culture and language.<sup>32</sup> In their demands Louis Riel, and the provisional government, which consisted of equal parts French and English speaking representatives, asked that there be equality

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<sup>29</sup> Silver, A.I and Marie-France Valleur. *The North-West Rebellion*. (Mississauga: Copp Clark Publishing Company: 1967), 55.

<sup>30</sup> Hayes, Derek. *Canada: An illustrated History*. (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 2004), 153.

<sup>31</sup> *Our Official Languages over time*. (Ottawa: Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 1990), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Flanagan, Louis 'David' Riel, 30.



for both languages. They wanted both languages to be present in the courts, all public records, as well as have the Judge of the Supreme Court bilingual.<sup>33</sup> At the time, it was stated in the British North American act of 1867 that:

“Either the English or the French Language may be used by any Person in the Debates of the Houses of the Parliament of Canada and of the Houses of the Legislature of Quebec; and both those Languages shall be used in the respective Records and Journals of those Houses; and either of those Languages may be used by any Person or in any Pleading or Process in or issuing from any Court of Canada established under this Act, and in or from all or any of the Courts of Quebec.”<sup>34</sup>

Louis Riel and the provisional government did not want French to be just an optional language; they wanted it to take on a role as equal to that of English, because of the large French speaking population in the area.<sup>35</sup> Since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the relations between the Métis and federal government have been marked with injustices, abuse, and fraud.<sup>36</sup>

“Not long after passing the Manitoba Act, Sir John A. Macdonald proceeded to dispatch a military expedition to Red River to establish control over the new province... An amendment to the Manitoba Act in 1874 called for the distribution of scrip to Métis adults in an effort to extinguish their title to the land.”<sup>37</sup>

After the defeat of Batoche in 1885, and the hanging of Louis Riel, the same scenario repeated in Saskatchewan.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Our Official Languages over time*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Ollivier, Maurice. “Section 133” *British North American Acts and Selected Statutes: 1867-1962*. (Ottawa: Roger Duhamel), 96.

<sup>35</sup> Flanagan, *Louis ‘David’ Riel*, 32.

<sup>36</sup> Gagnon, “La nation metisse...”, 183.

<sup>37</sup> “The Red River” *Métis History*. (Government of Saskatchewan: 2010)

<<http://www.fnmr.gov.sk.ca/community/metis-history2>> (April 22nd 2010)

<sup>38</sup> Gagnon, “La nation metisse...”, 183.

When Riel was asked back from his exile in the United States, by the Métis in the North West Territory, he jumped into a situation which was already in trouble.<sup>39</sup> The Indian and Métis were already preparing for a violent confrontation with the Canadian government, under the strong leadership of Big Bear and Poundmaker.<sup>40</sup> The Plains Indians were being forced to change from their traditional hunting to farming because of the buffalo famine.<sup>41</sup> Hunting buffalo were how the Plains Indians made a living, so without their primary form of livelihood, they had to switch to a less nomadic existence and begin farming. The famine was caused by the overhunting of the buffalo, largely thanks to the introduction of firearms and horses to the Plains Indians, by the Europeans.<sup>42</sup> This is said to be the reason for the Plains Indians who, at the time, were an amalgamation of several tribes who did not sign treaties with the Canadian government decided to fight against the Canadian troops.<sup>43</sup> “[The Riel Rebellions]<sup>44</sup> were... the last organized attempts on the part of Canada’s primitive peoples to with stand what, for want of a better word, may be termed progress, and preserve their culture and their indentify against the encroachments of civilization.”<sup>45</sup> During the time that Riel was in the North-West Territory, in the province that would become Saskatchewan, there were plenty of reports about him in other parts of the country. In Brandon, Manitoba, about 124 kilometres his home town of Red River, there were many articles about the rebellion going on and about Riel himself especially his capture and trial.

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<sup>39</sup> “Metis History Summary” *Manitoba Metis Federation*, . <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/25913805/Metis-History-Summary>> (April 19<sup>th</sup> 2010), 4.

<sup>40</sup> “Metis History Summary” *Manitoba Metis Federation*, 4.

<sup>41</sup> “Metis History Summary” *Manitoba Metis Federation*, 4.

<sup>42</sup> “European Contact,” *Canada’s First Nations*, (University of Calgary, 2000.)

<[http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied\\_history/tutor/firstnations/prairies.html](http://www.ucalgary.ca/applied_history/tutor/firstnations/prairies.html)> (April 22nd 2010)

<sup>43</sup> Silver, *The North-West Rebellion*, 26.

<sup>44</sup> Sawchuk refers to both the Rebellions in which Louis Riel was the leader as the Red River Rebellions, and does not distinguish between the two.

<sup>45</sup> Sawchuk, 16. (Stanley 1974: 24)

*Trial of a traitor (or hero?)*

After the battle of Batoche on May 15<sup>th</sup> 1885, Louis Riel who decided not to flee with some of the other leaders of the North-West Rebellion surrendered himself to the Canadian forces. He was sent to Regina on May 23<sup>rd</sup> to await his trial.

The trial of someone accused of treason, was sure to attract attention from newspapers across the country. Those papers would have formulated opinions about him and his actions. One newspaper that had a front page story devoted to him nearly every bi-monthly printing after his May 23<sup>rd</sup> capture, was the *Brandon Sun*. Located 124 miles from present-day Winnipeg, the historical location of the Red River Settlement, the *Brandon Sun* is a glimpse of how he was viewed not far from home.

Apparently there were celebrations at the capture and the beginning of Louis Riel's trial. Even before there was a verdict handed down, there were those celebrating his death. "One of the features of the Winnipeg celebration was an effigy of this arch-rebel Riel."<sup>46</sup> They went so far as to build a scaffold and gallows, and re-enacted a hanging, plus a bomb of roughly half a pound of powder was placed inside the doll. Surrounded by thousands of Roman candles, "and after an exhilarating pyrotechnic display, the filling of the effigy ignited, and the leader of the rebellion was blown sky high."<sup>47</sup> It seemed that the crowd that had gathered was very excited about the effigy being blown up.<sup>48</sup> Even in the early days of the case, it split Canada's English- and French-

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<sup>46</sup> "Rough on Riel" *Brandon Sun*, July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1885, 2. (Manitoba Library Consortium)  
<<http://manitobia.ca/cocoon/launch/en/newspapers/BSN/1885/07/23/2/Olive>> (April 13<sup>th</sup> 2010)

<sup>47</sup> "Rough on Riel" *Brandon Sun*, 2.

<sup>48</sup> "Rough on Riel" *Brandon Sun*, 2.

speaking populations. English Canada demanded Riel's execution, while French Canada called on the Governor General to “exercise the Royal Prerogative of mercy.”<sup>49</sup>

In an issue, by the *Brandon Sun*, that was published nine days after Riel had surrendered himself and was taken to Regina. It is clear to see the type of propaganda generated by Louis Riel himself and all of the myths that grew up around him. He had yet to be charged with anything and it would seem that he was simply in the custody of the Canadian Government.

“It is rumoured that Riel intends to make a full confession of his connection with the previous trouble in this country, and that a number of persons in this city are considerably exercised over the probable disclosures, which it is claimed would incriminate to a certain extent many whose names have hitherto not been mentions in this connection. This is merely a rumour, and is given for what it is worth.”<sup>50</sup>

Such rumours would have made people very nervous, especially those who had any sort of connection with Riel. It was already known that he was the leader of the Red River Rebellion, but there was never any documentation of him stirring up other trouble, nor was a confession ever published.

The *Brandon Sun* wrote about a flaw in the indictment made against Riel. It stated that he was a traitor to the Queen, but at the time of the trial Riel, was in fact an American citizen.

Instead of being indicted under treason, it should have been, “under the statute which provides

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<sup>49</sup> “The Trial: Verdict, and Sentence.” *The Dominion Institute*, 2005.

<<http://www.infinitebang.com/ourheroes.ca/content.php?hero=ldr&chapternum=10&pagenum=2>> (April 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

<sup>50</sup> “It is Rumoured” *Brandon Sun*, May 21<sup>st</sup> 1885, 1. (Manitoba Library Consortium)

<<http://manitobia.ca/cocoon/launch/en/newspapers/Brandon%20Sun%20Weekly/1885/05/21/Olive>> (April 13<sup>th</sup> 2010)

for the punishment of foreigners, levying war in Canada.”<sup>51</sup> It is stated in the article, that this type of trial was similar to that against the Fenians.

They were a group of Irish patriots, with a base in the United States that made a few incursions into Canada in the early 1860’s. “This organization was a revolutionary group dedicated to the overthrow of British rule in Ireland. It had its roots in both the United States and Ireland and was popularly known as *The Fenian Movement...*”<sup>52</sup> The Fenians were named after the Fianna, a group of warriors in Irish history, first said to be under the leadership of Finn McCumhail.<sup>53</sup> It also shares a name with a modern group of republicans in Ireland called the Fianna Fáil.<sup>54</sup> The Fenians, who also had supporters in Canada, attempted to attain control of present day Canada and ransom it back to the British in exchange for Ireland’s freedom. However, though their initial efforts were successful, they were quickly tempered by the American government, who stopped the raids.<sup>55</sup> It is because of these raids by outsiders, that perhaps the incident with Riel was seen as such a controversial issue. This group of Irish patriots arose out of the potato famine of 1846-47. Over one million, according to the article by Dennis Clark, left Ireland during that time and took up residence in the United States, Britain, and Canada.

The news about Louis Riel’s capture, his trial and, eventually his execution were all front headlines in the *Brandon Sun*. Varying from small articles to nearly full page spreads the articles on what was happening to Louis Riel in Regina were prominent on the page and would have been read by hundreds or thousands. There were other papers, like the Toronto Mail, in Ontario,

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<sup>51</sup> “A Wingham Lawyer Claims Riel’s Indictment is Defective” *Brandon Sun*, July 23<sup>rd</sup> 1885, (Manitoba Library Consortium), 2.

<sup>52</sup> “The Fenians Place in Irish History” *The Fenians of Northern Kentucky* <<http://www.fenians-nky.com/history.htm>> (April 12th 2010)

<sup>53</sup> Cotterell, Arthur. *The Encyclopedia of Mythology*. (London: Lorenz Books, 1999), 50.

<sup>54</sup> “The Fianna Fáil Republican Party” *Fianna Fáil*, 2010. < <http://www.fiannafail.ie/>> (April 13<sup>th</sup> 2010)

<sup>55</sup> “The Fenians Place in Irish History” *The Fenians of Northern Kentucky*

who were reporting on the trial as well.<sup>56</sup> The facts about his life, his capture, and eventually his death seemed to be interesting to the general public as there were stories about what happened when he found out that the execution would happen, the poems he wrote before dying, even what he had as his last meal. One correspondent, from the Brandon Sun, went to Regina and was granted an audience with Riel. He writes:

“The condemned man was quite calm and stood talking to Dr. Jukes. On entering the cell Riel looked up and said to the sheriff, ‘So you have come to with the [...]’<sup>57</sup> announcements well I am glad to go and be relieved of my suffering’.”<sup>58</sup>

There are also a lot of detail about what he was wearing and how he acted as he approached the gallows and once he was on them. “Riel walked firmly without assistance down the six steps to the scaffold, and, taking his stand on the drop, constantly ejaculating in French, “In God I put my trust.”<sup>59</sup>

Before Riel was hanged, the correspondent from the Brandon Sun, also recorded what he asked to have done with his body: “Riel said: I want my body taken by my friends to be buried in St. Boniface.”<sup>60</sup> It is said that his body was in fact returned to St. Boniface on December 9<sup>th</sup> of 1885, and that he was buried in the cemetery at St. Boniface Cathedral.<sup>61</sup>

*Prophet or insane leader: what Louis Riel saw when he looked in the mirror*

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<sup>56</sup> Silver, *The North-West Rebellion*, 55.

<sup>57</sup> Word was too faded to read.

<sup>58</sup> “Riel hanged on Monday Morning. He confesses his crimes, asks forgiveness of all.” *Brandon Sun*, Nov. 19<sup>th</sup> 1885, (Manitoba Library Consortium), 1.  
<<http://manitoba.ca/cocoon/launch/en/newspapers/Brandon%20Sun%20Weekly/1885/11/19/Olive>> (April 13<sup>th</sup> 2010)

<sup>59</sup> “Riel hanged on Monday Morning.” *Brandon Sun*, Nov. 19<sup>th</sup> 1885, 1.

<sup>60</sup> “Riel hanged on Monday morning.” *Brandon Sun*, Nov. 19<sup>th</sup> 1885, 1.

<sup>61</sup> “Louis Riel: The Death.” *Louis Riel Biography*. (The Heritage Centre) <<http://www.shsb.mb.ca/Riel/emort.htm>> (March 15th 2010)

It was not until later in his life that Louis Riel chose and baptized himself with the middle name of 'David'. Similar to the future King of the Israelites, who slew the mammoth Goliath, Louis Riel had his own "Goliath" to vanquish, which came in the form of the Canadian and British militaries. The armies were sent by the prime minister of Canada, John A. MacDonald, to stop the revolt that the Métis of the Red River Settlement had begun in order to save their lands from the encroaching and newly formed country of Canada.

It is no wonder that Louis was compared to David. Both were persecuted by a foe that was not going to relax their pursuit. It is speculated by Flanagan that there were there were two reasons that Riel chose the name David; the first being because of its association with the Old Testament King and the second because it was a rather common name at the time.<sup>62</sup> At first it was not Louis who associated himself with David, it was his friend Joseph Dubuc, whom he met at Montreal College and who joined the provisional government of the Métis in 1870<sup>63</sup>,

"When Dubuc visited Riel in hiding, he compared him to the David of the Ancient Hebrews. The point of similarity of course was that Riel, like David, had achieved an unexpected success as a young man. Each man had defeated an external power which threatened his people with destruction. And then each, in a sudden reversal of fortune, had been compelled to flee: David from the wrath of Saul, Riel from Canadian justice."<sup>64</sup> This was one of two reasons that Louis, supposedly, began using the name of David. The second was given by Joseph Dubuc, as well, in a letter to Louis Riel, in which he advised the wanted

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<sup>62</sup> Flanagan, "Louis Riel's' name 'David'.", 54.

<sup>63</sup> "Joseph Dubuc (1840-1914)" *Manitoba Historical Society*, 2010.  
<[http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/dubuc\\_j.shtml](http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/people/dubuc_j.shtml)> (March 26th 2010)

<sup>64</sup> Flanagan, "Louis Riel's name: "David'".", 56.

man to go by another name, so that he would not be easily identified. David was a very ordinary name, like Pierre or Jean, and he would blend in with others around him.<sup>65</sup>

Louis Riel had a very Old Testament view of the world as well, “he came to view himself as a human bridge- between native and white, French and English, Catholic and Protestant, British and American, human and divine.”<sup>66</sup> Riel believed that the Métis were the chosen people of God and that it is through His will and His intervention that the Métis would overcome their enemies no matter how far they were outnumbered or out gunned. Much in the same way that David was able to overcome the large number of Philistines that were poised against him during nearly every battle that ensued between them. It is through violence that the Métis will bring their point to the foreground and make the European Canadians leave them alone. He shows this by saying:

“Oh my Métis People! You complain that your lands have been stolen. Why, how can it be that you have not yet recovered them? You hold all the cards, you are strong enough. All you have to do is take your lands the foreigner cannot resist you. Pray God to grant you His Spirit; and the moral force of His wisdom, together with the courage of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, will make you surmount all difficulties.”<sup>67</sup>

Similarly, King David calls upon the advice of the Lord when he goes into battle against the Philistines, "Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will you give them into my hand?"<sup>68</sup> Much like David claimed that the Lord spoke to him and assured him of victory, "The Lord said to David, "God up, for I will certainly give the Philistines into your hand." <sup>69</sup> so Riel said he

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph Dubuc to Louis Riel, Oct. 17th, 1873. PAM, Riel Collection, no. 220 (PAM: Provincial Archives of Manitoba.) Quoted from Thomas Flanagan, "Louis Riel's name: 'David'." , 56.

<sup>66</sup> Flanagan, *Louis 'David' Riel*, 184.

<sup>67</sup> Riel, Louis. *The Diaries of Louis Riel*. (Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1976), 54.

<sup>68</sup> 2 Samuel 5: 19

<sup>69</sup> 2 Samuel 5: 19



received the same assurance, "They [the Métis] were faced with real soldiers. God alone has saved us." <sup>70</sup> For men who are so devoted to their faith, to have the Lord tell them that battles will be won in their favour; there would have been no question about going to war.

Riel also wanted to give the Métis a religion that was similar to Christianity but also different, in order to set them apart. He wanted to bring Mosaic traditions like polygamy, Saturday Sabbath, and the clergy being able to marry, into the religion. He wanted to emulate the Jewish religion because it was one of the first with God at its head and, as a people; they were very close to God. Another aspect of Old Testament faith that Louis explores through his visions with God, is the idea of sacrifices. For Christians, Christ made the last and ultimate sacrifice with his body and therefore all others are made in embodiment of him but blood of people or animals is not shed. Yet God had often asked for animal, and occasionally human which never went their course, in the Old Testament. This can be seen in Louis vision of the Lord after the battle Fish Creek in 1885,

"Oh my Métis Nation! For a long time you have offended me with your horse races, by gambling on these detestable races, by your obstinacy, by your odious wrangling about your wicked horse races. That is why," says the Eternal Christ, "I killed your horses yesterday while sparing you."<sup>71</sup>

The notion of Louis Riel's sanity was often called into question because of his proclamation that he could hear and see God. Yet there were those who followed his leadership without question because he was so certain that the Métis people would be delivered from the evil hands of the Canadian Army by God.

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<sup>70</sup> Riel, *Louis Riel Diaries*, 84.

<sup>71</sup> Riel, *Louis Riel Diaries*, 72.

Louis Riel would write down some of his visions and conversations with God in his journals. His own family and friends placed him in an asylum when he was thirty, under the name Louis David, one of the many times that he used the name David in his travels. They placed him there because of his insistence that God was speaking to him and had made him a prophet for the Métis people. Years after this incident, Louis claimed that he had only pretended to be insane to elude capture from the Canadian Army. He says that he emulated David when the future King had gone to the gates of the Philistines and was refused entry.<sup>72</sup>

The circumstances are vastly similar and sources claim that it was Riel himself who pointed out the similarity, although it would not have been difficult for devout Catholics to make such connections. Both Riel and David claim to hear and see God, it is what makes them the prophets and the person which others look up to. For David, though, it was a natural occurrence as God spoke to those he favoured, according to the writings of the Bible. Riel, on the other hand, was considered delusional and insane because he heard the Lord speak to him. Both these men were invited into environments that could be dangerous after they were acknowledged by the people. Saul brought David into his home because he wanted the boy to be associated with him and perhaps he would regain the favour of God once again.<sup>73</sup> Riel was elected to a federal position in the House of Commons after he returned from his first voluntary exile. He remained in Ottawa long enough to have his picture taken, but he never took the position he was elected to, for fear of being apprehended by the authorities.<sup>74</sup>

There are others in French history, which have been essential in the rejuvenation of the people and country. One such heroine is Jeanne D'Arc, a medieval leader of the French army in

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<sup>72</sup> 1 Samuel

<sup>73</sup> 1 Samuel

<sup>74</sup> Stanley, George F.G. "Louis Riel" *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2010.

<<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=a1ARTA0006837>> (March 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

the Hundred Years War. She had successful campaigns at Patay, Troyes, Riems, and St. Denis in 1429. After a few months of truce campaigned once more, this time at Burgundian where her fate was sealed. King Charles VII left Jeanne in the hands of the enemy, after being captured by John of Luxemburg and sold the English. She was tried and convicted of heresy, and burnt at the stake, on May 30<sup>th</sup> 1431<sup>75</sup>. Much like Riel, Jeanne D’Arc said she heard the voice of God and that she was chosen to bring the French to victory over the English. Regarded as a lunatic by some, during and after her time, there is no denying the influence she had on the French people. Yet where Jeanne D’Arc was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1920, by Pope Benedict XV, Riel, who held much the same position, was not. Though there have been petitions sent to the Vatican, in attempts to get him canonized.<sup>76</sup>

Once Riel was found guilty of treason, he recanted the belief that God had spoken to him and inspired him to go up against the Canadian Government as well as try to start his own branch of the Catholic religion. In accordance with the Roman Catholic tradition, he received the Last Sacraments before death, so that his soul would be cleansed and reach heaven. Once he received the Sacraments, however, he reverted back to his old “true”<sup>77</sup> self and before he died, Riel placed this note at the beginning of his diary: “Everything written in this book is inspired, but I have expressed it in common, ordinary language. Divine inspiration made me write this book.”<sup>78</sup> The fact that Riel was convinced that God was speaking directly to him got him into plenty of trouble with the Roman Catholic faith. Not only was it against policy for believers to communicate

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<sup>75</sup> Thurston, H. “St. Joan of Arc” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 2009) <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08409c.htm>> (March 26th 2010.)

<sup>76</sup> Boswell, Randy. “Louis Riel, freedom fighter, traitor, poet.” <<http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/toronto/archive/2008/11/13/louis-riel-freedom-fighter-traitor-poet.aspx>> (April 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

<sup>77</sup> Riel, *Diaries*, 94.

<sup>78</sup> Riel, *Diaries*, 94. (Beginning of the August 1885)

directly with God<sup>79</sup>, it was also highly frowned upon to simply break away and shift or alter traditions.<sup>80</sup> When he recanted his messianic claims, he was under supervision from the church as is shown by the first beginning of his diary,

“Everything I will write in this notebook is subject to the approval of his Excellency Monseigneur Alexandre-Antonin Tache, Archbishop of St. Boniface. At the outset, I renounce anything in my writings which, in Monseigneur’s opinion, deserves condemnation.”<sup>81</sup>

While Louis Riel was in prison, just a few days before he was to be hanged, it is said that he asked for a pen and paper. The guard who was watching over him, Constable Robert Hobbs, gave into his request and Riel, apparently, complied twenty poems all in English.<sup>82</sup> As one of them shows Riel did not seem to be scared of what was going to die, “The rope/Threatens by life; but/thank God, I fear not.”<sup>83</sup> In fact it was recorded by Dr. Jukes that Riel thought he was going to be resurrected after his death, therefore he was not afraid to die.<sup>84</sup> Like most of Riel’s life, he was adapting Biblical references to himself and his cause. He wanted to make himself and the Métis people the chosen of God in the New Word. The way he calls upon the Lord and ancient biblical heroes can be in his use of the name ‘David’ when he signed the poems: “As he often did at the time, Riel- who came to see himself as a Judeo-Christian freedom fighter in the tradition of the biblical King David- signed his name “Louis ‘David’ Riel”...”<sup>85</sup> He was

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<sup>79</sup>Fairchild, Mary “Authority within the Church” *Roman Catholic Beliefs and Practices: Comparing the Beliefs of Catholicism with Protestantism*. About.com: 2010.

<<http://christianity.about.com/od/denominations/a/catholicdenom.htm>> (March 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

<sup>80</sup> Fairchild, Mary “Authority within the Church”

<sup>81</sup> Riel, *Diaries*, 94. (Supposedly the first beginning of the diary, before the after note was written.)

<sup>82</sup> Boswell, “Louis Riel, freedom fighter, traitor, poet.”

<sup>83</sup> Boswell, “Louis Riel, freedom fighter, traitor, poet”

<sup>84</sup>Dr. Augustus Jukes Papers. (Glenbow-Alberta Institute: Calgary) taken from Thomas Flanagan, *Louis ‘David’ Riel*, 174.

<sup>85</sup> Boswell, “Louis Riel, freedom fighter, traitor, poet.”

maintaining his devotion at the critical point in his life, the moment before being re-acquainted with his God. Often it is the charismatic, religious characteristics that people associate with Louis Riel, even today.

*Contemporary views of Louis Riel and the Métis:*

There is speculation about whether or not Louis Riel did what was best for the Métis of present-day Manitoba and Saskatchewan. His rebellions did not deter the Canadian government from still acquiring both parts of the, then, North-West Territories, and turning them into Canadian provinces in 1870 and 1905, respectively. Riel might not have been able to stop the government from taking them over, but he certainly halted their progressions and catch their attention. One result of his actions would be: “Amendments were made to the Indian Act which barred the incitement of riots among Indians and half-breeds as well as the sale of ammunition or ball cartridges to them.”<sup>86</sup>

Even today, there is still an interest in the life of Louis Riel and what he accomplished. Most recently were the acquisition of some poems he wrote mere days before his death. It is said that were twenty, which were kept safe by one of the guards assigned to him 125 years ago. In 2009 on Feb 16<sup>th</sup>, which just happened to be Louis Riel Day, Manitobans were finally able to see the long-secret writings, which were kept by North West Mounted Police Constable Robert Hobbs. In an article by Steve Lambert of the Canadian Press, he states that: “The Manitoba Métis Foundation was determined not to let the poems go into another private collect and with

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<sup>86</sup> “History of the Indian Act (Part One)” *Saskatchewan Indian v08 n03 p04*, March 1978, <<http://www.sicc.sk.ca/saskindian/a78mar04.htm>> (April 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

donations from local charities, placed the winning \$32,000 bid.”<sup>87</sup> The federation’s president, David Chartrand, made a comment at the ceremony that was recorded by Lambert: “For too long, we’ve watched some of our great leaders’... artefacts disappear into foreign soil.”<sup>88</sup> It is obviously important for the Manitoba Métis Foundation to keep Louis Riel’s diaries on Canadian soil, and preferably in their protective custody.

It is still suggested that Louis Riel is one of the most controversial people in Canadian history.<sup>89</sup> The mere mention of his name can spark a debate depending on what the perception in the room is. It is said, in an article by Randy Boswell, that the Red River and North-West rebellions created a gulf between English and French Canadians that lasted for generations.<sup>90</sup> He says that it is also debated as to whether or not Riel, “should be seen as a self-deluded traitor for his anti-Ottawa military actions or as a heroic nation-builder for his role in the founding of Manitoba and the birth of Western Canada.”<sup>91</sup> In 2008, the government of Manitoba asked school across the province to help name the newest provincial holiday. There were 114 responses from schools with suggestions that ranged from citizenship to history to culture, all showcasing Manitoba’s diversity.<sup>92</sup> According to the list provided by the government, there were 13 schools who suggested that the day be named after Louis Riel.<sup>93</sup> It was not, however, the most common suggestion. With 22, “Family Day” or other variations with the word “family” in them was the

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<sup>87</sup> Lambert, Steve. “Riel’s poems echo through time: Métis leader’s writings while awaiting hangman in 1885 are finding an audience for first time.” *The Canadian Press*, Feb. 17<sup>th</sup> 2009.< <http://www.thestar.com/article/588501>> (April 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

<sup>88</sup> Lambert, “Riel’s poems...”

<sup>89</sup> Simons, Paula, “He haunts us still: the legacy of Louis Riel.” *Leader Post*. (Canwest Publishing: 2010) <<http://www.leaderpost.com/news/haunts+still+legacy+Louis+Riel/2605246/story.html>> (April 21<sup>st</sup> 2010)

<sup>90</sup> Boswell, “Louis Riel, freedom fighter, traitor, poet.”

<sup>91</sup> Boswell, “Louis Riel, freedom fighter, traitor, poet.”

<sup>92</sup> “Origin of the holiday’s name” *Province of Manitoba*, 2008

<[http://www.gov.mb.ca/february\\_holiday/holiday\\_origin.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/february_holiday/holiday_origin.html)> (April 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

<sup>93</sup> “Participation Schools- Holiday Name suggestions” *Province of Manitoba*, 2008.

<[http://www.gov.mb.ca/asset\\_library/en/government/participatingschools.pdf](http://www.gov.mb.ca/asset_library/en/government/participatingschools.pdf)> (April 15<sup>th</sup> 2010)

most common. This new holiday takes place on the third Monday in February, coinciding with Ontario's Family Day.<sup>94</sup>

On October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009, Lieutenant-Governor of Saskatchewan, the Honourable Dr. Gordon L. Barnhart, declared that 2010 would be "The Year of The Métis" in the province of Saskatchewan. The year 2010 marks the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the North West Resistance, in which Louis Riel played a key role in<sup>95</sup>. It is said, that 2010 will be the year of commemoration, celebration and reconciliation for all Métis across North America.<sup>96</sup> Much like the province of Manitoba, which named a holiday after Louis Riel, the province of Saskatchewan has shown its awareness of the Métis people by acknowledging their struggles, history, and ancestry. The article speaks of retribution to the Métis people for all the wrongs that have been delivered to the government.<sup>97</sup>

There is another side to the story of Louis Riel. Much like in his own time, there is a divide about how the people of Canada treat this historical figure. He is often portrayed as either a hero, martyred for the sake of his people, or a villain rightfully convicted of high treason. Even now the mythology of Louis Riel can spark debates and stir up a commotion for people all over the country.

In an article by Paula Simons of the Leaderpost, written in February 2010, it claims that Peter Goldring, the Conservative MP for Edmonton East, mailed out a newsletter asking the people denounce Riel as a murderer, villain, and anarchist.<sup>98</sup> It goes on to say that he sent it out

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<sup>94</sup> "Employment Standards", *Ontario Ministry of Labour*, April 15<sup>th</sup> 2010

<<http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/es/>> (April 15th 2010)

<sup>95</sup> "2010, named "Year of the Métis" by Province of Saskatchewan: MN-S Applauds Historical Announcement Made During Saskatchewan's Speech from the Throne.", *Manitoba Métis Foundation Inc.*, Dec. 15<sup>th</sup> 2009.

<[http://www.mmfm.mb.ca/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=178:2010-named-qthe-year-of-the-metisq-by-province-of-saskatchewan&catid=51:latest-news&Itemid=105](http://www.mmfm.mb.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=178:2010-named-qthe-year-of-the-metisq-by-province-of-saskatchewan&catid=51:latest-news&Itemid=105)> (April, 19<sup>th</sup> 2010)

<sup>96</sup> "2010, named "Year of the Metis..." *Manitoba Métis Foundation Inc.*

<sup>97</sup> "2010, named "Year of the Metis..." *Manitoba Métis Foundation Inc.*

<sup>98</sup> Simons, Paula, "He haunts us still: the legacy of Louis Riel."

in response to Winnipeg NDP MP Pat Martin's campaign to have Riel granted a full posthumous pardon. Not only did Goldring upset by the Métis in Manitoba, but also those in Alberta, who denounced what he said.<sup>99</sup> The author also points out that the backlash from Goldring's manifesto shows just how divided people still are on the issue of Riel and the Rebellions he lead. It is suggested, by many in the article, that to paint Riel as a villain or hero, would denounce certain facets of his life. He was different things to different people and there is no way to place him on either side without offending one party or the other.<sup>100</sup> Goldring seems to be upset because he claims that there are people who want to change the history books regarding Louis Riel.<sup>101</sup> He also points out that Riel was responsible for the deaths of 80 Canadian citizens during the two rebellions.<sup>102</sup> He does not, however, say that there were also casualties on the Métis side during both Rebellions. There were about 110 casualties for the Métis and Indians involved in the Red River and North-West Rebellions.<sup>103</sup> In comparison to other incursions fought on Canadian soil, the death of approximately 200 people is not high. As the Rebellions unfolded, Riel tried to keep them as peaceful as possible and negotiate with the Canadian Government, but the Government did not hold up their ends. Had they, Riel might be more revered as a Father of Confederation rather than a traitor. Goldring makes Riel accountable for every death that occurred until his leadership, even though there were several leaders, especially in the North-West Rebellion, which had the Plains Cree chiefs Big Bear, Poundmaker, and Gabriel Dumont in those roles.

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<sup>99</sup> Simons, "He haunts us still..."

<sup>100</sup> Simons, "He haunts us still..."

<sup>101</sup> Goldring, Peter. "The Truth about Louis Riel." *Issue 91A* (December: 2009) <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/27135370/Peter-Goldring-s-Louis-Riel-pamphlet>> (April 21st 2010)

<sup>102</sup> Goldring, "The Truth about Louis Riel."

<sup>103</sup> "Chapter Two: Riel Rebellions" *Canadians and Conflict*, (Edmonton Public Schools: 2001) <<http://www.lermuseum.org/ler/education/canadians&conflict/chapter2.pdf>> (April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010)



It is suggested that people want to 'un-hang' Riel in an attempt to pardon him. That is, to have the entire trial re-done. That is something which is completely improbable because it has been 125 years since the trial was processed and there has been too much time and opinions drawn up. While the idea of 'un-hanging' Riel is an interesting one, it would completely change history and that is not what needs to be done.

There seems to always be a controversy about the role that Louis Riel played in Canadian history. There are some who want him canonized by the Vatican and others who do not want him white washed in the history books. Whether or not he was a national hero, can be debated, but the fact is, he was certainly a leader and hero amongst the Métis people. Others are split down the middle about how to view Riel. He was either a hero or a villain or, though rarely, both. His name alone sparks debates among Canadians and his actions are constantly questioned.

He saw himself as the prophet to the Métis people, who would lead them from away from the oppressive Canadian government. He did not want the Métis people to be assimilated into Canadian society and forgotten. The Manitoba Act that he negotiated was to help the Métis and Indians of the soon-to-be province of Manitoba from completely losing themselves in the new Country, as well as welcome others into their land.

Louis Riel's fatidic role for himself and the Métis as God's chosen people provided powerful rhetoric and symbolism for Riel's efforts. Though we do not always associate later nineteenth-century Canada with the kind of religious societies of earlier ages, certainly the Catholic influence upon the Métis would have made these Old Testament concepts recognizable and influential.

It seems that there will always be the debate over what Louis Riel did for the Métis Nation. He will constantly be remembered for the different things that he did throughout his life time. If it has not been settled in 125 years, there is little doubt that it will even be an issue in which all Canadians can agree one way or another. The facts about his life speak for themselves: he lead two Rebellions against the Canadian government, helped negotiated the Manitoba Act, was exiled to the United States, and hanged as a traitor. There is no way to not look at every facet of his life in order to figure out what type of person he was. Whether a hero or a traitor, it does not take away from his role in Canadian history: bringing awareness and identify to the Métis people.