

# Any Important Form: Louis Riel in Sculpture

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**ABSTRACT.** Two statues of Louis Riel commissioned at the time of the centennial (1967), one by John Nugent in Regina and the other by Marcien Lemay in Winnipeg, were controversial from the beginning. Their detractors were mostly Metis organizations, while those who praised the sculptures were mostly the cultural descendants of the real Louis Riel detractors. The story of the creation, controversy, deinstallation, and replacement of the sculptures illustrates not only conflicts between "high" and "low" in public art but, more significant, how contradictions and misconceptions in public policy toward people of aboriginal descent were reflected in art.

**SOMMAIRE.** Deux statues de Louis Riel commandées à l'époque du centenaire (1967), oeuvres l'une de John Nugent pour Régina, et l'autre de Marcien Lemay pour Winnipeg, furent aussitôt l'objet de controverses. Leurs détracteurs étaient surtout les organisations métisses, tandis que les louanges venaient principalement des descendants culturels des détracteurs du vrai Louis Riel. L'histoire de la création des sculptures, de la controverse, puis de leur désinstallation et remplacement, illustre les conflits entre différents niveaux d'art populaire; elle montre aussi comment cet art reflète les contradictions et idées fausses qui imprègnent les décisions publiques portant sur les personnes d'origine autochtone.

Louis Riel is arguably Canada's most ambiguous hero. Hanged as a traitor in 1885, he is now considered a "father of Confederation" and to some extent a representative leader of both the West and of peoples of Native descent, as well as a Francophone martyr to English imperialism. Not surprisingly, an icon with such a wide variety of meanings has proven problematic to interpret as a literal icon, a work of art. This article traces the histories of two controversial images of Louis Riel in sculpture, one by John Nugent in Regina (1968-91) and one by Marcien Lemay in Winnipeg (1971-94).

Canada's centennial in 1967 roughly coincided with the centennial of the province of Manitoba (1970) and the diamond jubilees of the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta (1965). Centennial committees were formed in every town and province and entrusted with the work of planning and executing civic undertakings to honour the country, province, and locality. Substantial federal funding was available for centennial improvements, and in the prairie provinces additional monies were available for provincial celebration. Both Saskatchewan and Manitoba planned, among a great many other installations, from flower gardens through curling rinks and municipal garages to patriotic pageants, sculpture competitions followed by the commission of a winning piece. As we will see, Manitoba went on with its competition and sculpture, a heroic if abstracted statue of Louis Riel, but Saskatchewan, for a while, put its plan in abeyance. Its Creative Activities Subcommittee decided that "because sculpture is practically non-existent in Saskatchewan in any important form, Clement Greenberg of New York" should choose an "appropriate piece" of sculpture for the province to purchase for "not over \$15,000" and that the province should erect it in an art gallery or sculpture garden.<sup>1</sup> The entire sculpture project

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1 Saskatchewan Archives Board - Regina (SAB), Minutes of Creative Activities Subcommittee of Saskatchewan Jubilee and Centennial Committee, 22 March 1964.

languished, however, until 1967, when it was suddenly revived as the special cause of Saskatchewan's Liberal premier, Ross Thatcher. What Thatcher originally proposed was a bust of Louis Riel, and then a full, larger-than-life statue of the Metis leader whose trial and hanging in Regina had been the city's first claim to fame.

In 1967 Wilf Klein, the executive director of the Centennial Committee, approached Lumsden sculptor John Nugent, then Saskatchewan's lone bronze caster, and eventually offered him \$10,000 (\$5,000 less than the committee had proposed spending for something chosen by the New York expert) to create the Louis Riel. It was unveiled 2 October 1968 and, after twenty-four years of controversy, decommissioned and carted away to the vaults of the MacKenzie Art Gallery. Manitoba's contest winner was also a statue of Riel, also destined to controversy and eventual removal. The stories behind these two centennial sculptures and several subsequent sculptural representations of Riel and his lieutenant, Gabriel Dumont, illuminate some of the odder intersections between arts and audiences on the Prairies.

The story of the Winnipeg sculpture was relatively straightforward. Manitoba's existence as a province had been determined by the resistance of Louis Riel and his provisional government to the new Dominion of Canada that had attempted to occupy lands in the Red River Valley before they had been formally transferred from the jurisdiction of the Hudson's Bay Company to the new country. Louis Riel was, in his own words, as inscribed on the shell containing the statue, "the founder of Manitoba," and Riel was unquestionably the person most clearly linked with Manitoba's birth. Though many Anglo-Canadians during the centennial years still thought that Riel's government had been illegal and that the government of Canada had done properly, fifteen years later, in hanging the Metis leader as a traitor, there really was no other figure appropriate to the occasion. Thus it is not surprising that the province, with the urging of Metis MLA Jean Allard and under New Democratic premier Edward Schreyer, chose to commission a statue of Riel, though the previous Conservative government had not responded to the Metis community's requests for a Riel commemorative. Franco-Manitoban sculptor Marcien Lemay entered a seven-foot plaster statue in the Manitoba Society of Artists show in March 1969,<sup>2</sup> and a modified version of that design was chosen from among eight by a committee headed by former Chief Justice C. Rhodes Smith. The final sculpture shows a nude and tormented "humanoid" figure, hands behind back, standing fifteen feet tall (Figure 1). It is surrounded by "an outer shell, 30 feet in height, in the shape of a hollow cylinder split in two from top to bottom" (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> The shell, intended partly as a shield to the nudity of the

2 *Winnipeg Free Press*, 26 March 1969; interview, Jean Allard, "As It Happens," CBC Radio, 18 July 1994.

3 Centennial Library, Winnipeg, Riel File, Press Release, Manitoba Government Information Services Branch, 30 December 1971.

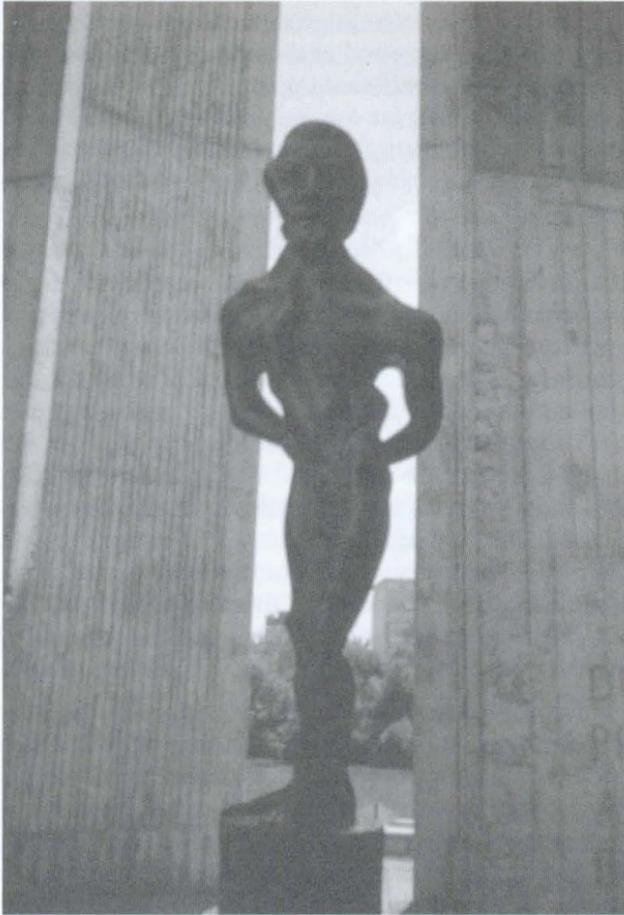


Figure 1. Marcien Lemay sculpture, original installation, Winnipeg. Photo by Frances Kaye.

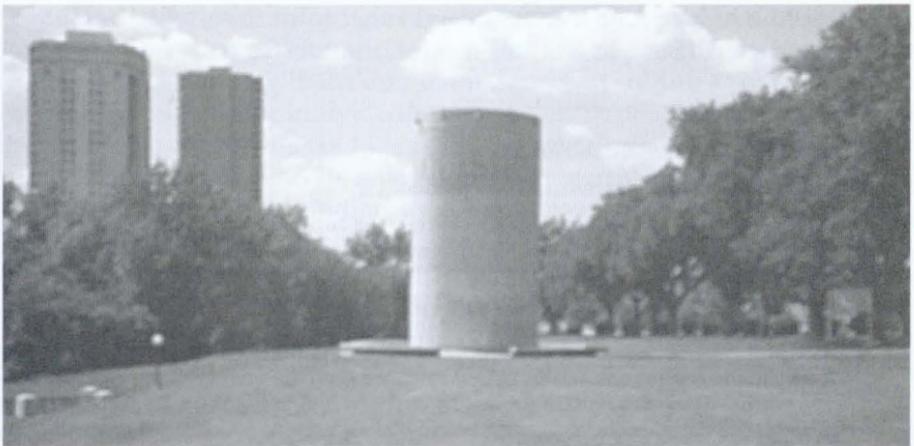


Figure 2. Shield for Lemay sculpture, by Etienne Gaboury, original installation, Winnipeg. Photo by Frances Kaye.

sculpture, bears inscriptions in English and French of some of Riel's words. The finished sculpture, unveiled at the end of December 1971, was considerably changed from the half-sized plaster model. The original figure was nude and "humanoid" but far more dynamic, its hands up in exhortation, its face lifted, carrying through the argument of the right hand. Premier Schreyer, Ida Carriere, secretary of the Union Nationale Métisse St. Joseph du Manitoba, and Tourism, Recreation and Cultural Affairs Minister Laurent L. Desjardins unveiled the piece.<sup>4</sup>

From its very inception, the sculpture was controversial. The abstract nude rendering had called up the shell even before the piece was finished. The final inscription on the shell, "I know that through the grace of God, I am the founder of Manitoba," was focus for more controversy, though Schreyer denied it<sup>5</sup>; and even the setting of the statue *behind* the Legislative Building (a fully clothed and realistic Queen Victoria sits in front) all offended various segments of the statue's audience. Manitoba Metis Federation president Angus Spence, invited to attend but not to speak at the unveiling, called the piece an "incongruous monstrosity." Although Spence thought the representation an insult rather than a compliment to the Metis people, he philosophically concluded that Riel did not "live, fight and die to have a statue erected in his honor." Riel, Spence speculated, would have responded to the unveiling by saying "Big deal! This is not what I fought for. Go and do something for my people."<sup>6</sup>

The idea of making Riel a hero was anathema to the ideological descendants of those who had opposed the Metis leader in Manitoba and Saskatchewan; but as Spence's comments show, the main objection came not from the anti-Riel faction but from among those who regarded Riel as their own cultural hero, including the descendants of mixed-blood peoples who had not necessarily backed Riel in the nineteenth century. The focus of the controversy never became the claim that Riel was not a fitting hero to represent the West. Riel was in many ways an odd choice for a representative of the Metis: even in the successful Red River Rebellion he had never had the support of the entire mixed-race community, which included the descendants of Scots as well as French-Canadian fur trade fathers, while

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4 *Winnipeg Free Press*, 26 March 1969; *ibid.*

5 *Winnipeg Free Press*, 11 December 1971, 1 January 1972.

6 *Winnipeg Free Press*, 10 January 1972. The term Metis currently includes all Canadians of mixed aboriginal and European descent. The mixed-blood peoples associated with Riel in the nineteenth century included those of French and Native (Ojibway, Cree, and Chipewyan, for the most part) and those of Scots and Native (mostly Cree) descent. Some "Old Settlers" of either French or British (mostly Scots) descent also supported Riel in 1869-70 and rather fewer of these Europeans supported him in 1884-85. More recently arrived Ontario settlers (especially those associated with the militant Protestant Orange Order) were the largest group of those who opposed him in the West. By the 1960s, the class of people claiming Riel as a culture hero had expanded beyond the descendants of his supporters in the nineteenth century.

in 1885 at Batoche only a very small portion of the people openly followed Riel (though many more may have covertly agreed with him); and the little settlement at St. Laurent was only a dot on the whole complex map of the West with its interlocking mixed-race and Native communities.<sup>7</sup> But the trial and hanging of Louis Riel crystallized him as a martyr to the cause, and his voluminous writings, the mysteries of his life, and even the extent to which he was used as a symbol by persons outside any definition of Metis or mixed-blood populations — Quebec Francophones or populist westerners, for instance — had made him the inescapable national image of the Metis. Just as the Canadian abroad always images forth a mounted policeman, the Metis have come to image forth Riel, thereby collapsing, at least as far as the image goes, three populations that had been separate in the nineteenth century — the Metis (mixed blood, mostly Catholic, people of French, French-Canadian, and Scots fur trade ancestry), the “English half breeds” (mixed blood, mostly Protestant, people of Scots or English fur trade ancestry), and other mixed-blood people who were the descendants of European and Native peoples not necessarily connected to the fur trade at all. Controversy that might have raged around choosing Riel as the image not only of the Metis but of Native Canadians never materialized. Rather the controversy was an aesthetic one: what was the legitimate manner to represent Louis Riel, Metis hero?

In its most elementary form, the argument is simply highbrow versus lowbrow. A sculpture competition carried out by a society of artists is by nature fairly highbrow, especially if it is to be judged by an intellectually, if not necessarily culturally, sophisticated panel. Lemay is a trained sculptor, cognizant of both traditional art history and the conventions of modern abstraction. But artists and cognoscenti are not the main audience for public art. Public art is exactly that — public; and while governments and intellectuals may try to use it to “educate” the masses, it is going to be seen by a mass audience. In this case the question of art “class” as it were, is complicated by race and racism. To be Metis, mixed blood, or Indian in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Canada was, by social if not by self definition, to be poor and ill-educated. Social scientists did not consider individuals who had acquired standing in the dominant Canadian culture as Native, and in many cases nor did the individuals themselves. To be successful was to stop being Metis, to stop being Indian. In fact, the Indian Act required, in a complex way, that someone who became successful and enfranchised was to cease, legally, to be an Indian: thus “highbrow” people of Indian descent were not defined as Indian or Metis. Of course, contrary to the government’s hopes and expectations, people did succeed in Euro-Canadian culture and did continue to identify themselves as Metis or Indian, but they did so in defiance of social construction. People more readily defined as Metis, both by themselves and by society at large, were not likely to have

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7 J.R. Miller, “From Riel to the Metis,” *Canadian Historical Review* 69, no. 1 (1988): 1-20.

degrees in art history. Thus only a relatively small group existed who both identified with Riel and with the Metis, and were knowledgeable in "high-brow" art traditions. For most people who identified and were identified as Metis, modern art was a foreign concept.

In his Riel statuary, furthermore, Lemay had conflated four fairly separate artistic traditions: that of the classical nude (Michelangelo's "David"), that of the abstract form intended to represent humanity rather than a specific individual (a Henry Moore figure), that of heroic public art ("The Death of General Wolfe"), and that of the semi-nude and tortured Christ on the cross. Although the conventions of historical art sometimes call for clothing from an anachronistic but conventionally heroic period — Wolfe in a toga — they do not, unlike the classical sculpture or the twentieth-century abstraction, call for a nude. Then there is the question of religious propriety and "community standards": the Vatican for instance holds and displays some of the finest Renaissance statuary, but its figures are nearly all carefully fig-leaved. The Manitoba Metis community of French origin is overwhelmingly Catholic; traditional Cree or Ojibwa society evinces a happy raunchiness, with jokes and stories about the body and bodily functions, but such joking is not traditionally intended for permanent public display and usually includes some function of teaching about proper behaviour.<sup>8</sup> And even in non-Catholic, non-Metis, non-Native communities on the Prairies, nudity is more often tittered at or censored than displayed.

Furthermore, the placing of the Riel statue called forth inevitable comparisons with the Queen Victoria statue. A nude and gaunt Riel in the back yard, and a plump and fully clothed Victoria in the front yard are uncomfortably close to a social reality in which "Metis" was defined as poor and hungry and "Anglo" as rich and successful, however untrue these generalizations might be for individuals. A fat old lady in a dress remains a fat old lady in a dress, even if she was a queen, while a nude humanoid figure represents timeless human striving; however, this argument does not always seem particularly relevant to a public audience not concerned with such ideas.

The tradition of historical art is not to the universal but to the particular. Wolfe is not remembered as a universal hero but as an Englishman who died while his cause — the conquest of New France — succeeded. We memorialize winners, and if they themselves perished in ensuring the success of their cause, we may shed a silent tear and like them all the better because they never got old and fat and vain, but died in the glory of youth and triumph. Public statuary represents a kind of nationalism — that's our guy and he won. It is Queen Victoria in front of the Legislative Buildings, not the Faery Queen, and she represents the triumph of English ways in a new land. It is an American flag that the marines are raising on Iwo Jima.

8 See, for example, Herbert T. Schwarz, *Tales from the Smoke House*, illustrated by Daphne Odjig (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1974) for examples of stories and an explanation of their uses.

More recent public monuments, like the Vietnam Memorial or the AIDS quilt, are moving in their very specificity: the listing of *each* name, like the cenotaphs to the Great War in so many small Canadian towns or the spires that list each one of the community's fallen children and have often been reengraved to honor those who died in World War II and Korea.

Part of the problem with the Riel monuments is in making the hero of one group serve as the representative of another larger group which he in some measure opposed. A tortured and naked Wolfe representing in his death the rise of Quebec independence might resemble the centennial Riels. As Maria Campbell asks graphically, "Universal, what the fuck do you know about universal when you think that we have a monopoly on oppression?"<sup>9</sup> Why are Metis and Native people portrayed as the universal image of suffering? Were not Euro-Canadians victims, too? Lemay, French-Canadian and Winnipegger though he be, was operating out of a Euro-North American artistic tradition that universalizes the Native figure as noble victim, at the same time as it valorizes the Euro-North American individual as a culture-specific hero. Metis opposition to the figure may in some cases come from cultural philistinism or pietistic prudery, or even from a kind of cultural balkanization — that's *my* hero, not yours — but it also comes from the sense that public statues of historical figures are, traditionally, representations of *our* heroes. Wolfe in toga, perhaps, but still Wolfe the dauntless hero, representing the maple leaf forever. And Wolfe is usually portrayed in authentic eighteenth-century garb, in the same way that the bronzes in the style of Russell and Remington that have always been so popular on the Prairies portray the universal cowboy, all right, but authentic down to the last hole in the cinch. The nude Riel also conjures up the iconographic tradition of the naked "savage" opposing the fully clad and "civilized" European carving an empire out of a so-called New World.

The continuing conflict over the Lemay statue, then, is an aesthetic one, having to do in some sense with what we have come to call cultural appropriation, but more fundamentally with the expectations of a primary audience that are out of sync with those of the artist and commissioning body. Politically and ideologically the project made sense from the point of view of the government and those involved, including people associated with the Metis community like Lemay and MLA Jean Allard, who had fought for a Riel statue. Riel had been born in what became Manitoba, and he had scored his greatest successes there, forming a provisional government and leading Manitoba into the new Dominion of Canada. Lemay was commissioned by an NDP government, and Riel had always been to some extent a hero of the left, the little guy who had stood up to the big guys and — to some extent — won. And, as Douglas Owsram has pointed out, by the time of the centennial Riel's public image had changed from the predominant version

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9 Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths, *The Book of Jessica* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1989), 35.

of the outlaw to that of the first spokesman for the West against Ottawa and central Canada as a whole — the first regional leader.<sup>10</sup>

Regina was a far less likely location for a Riel statue than was Winnipeg. Regina was the site of Riel's imprisonment, trial, and eventual hanging — not his success. Riel's intervention in the cause of the Metis settlers at Batoche had ended in defeat and failure. He had played little part, except for a colourful and dramatic side plot, in the development of Saskatchewan, and his name for some Euro-Saskatchewanians still conjured up lurid, if untrue, images of Indian uprisings, of murder and rapine. The Saskatchewan government was a Liberal one, led by Ross Thatcher, a former CCF MP who had crossed the aisle and who hated everything smacking of socialism or communism; sculptor John Nugent believes Thatcher would have hanged Riel again had he had the chance. His government certainly sacked Malcolm Norris, the Prince Albert Metis leader, originally from Alberta, who, in 1967, arguably came as close to Riel as anyone in the province. Why, then, did Ross Thatcher, the hardware magnate from Moose Jaw, make a personal commitment to the erection of a bronze statue of Louis Riel?

In order to come to any satisfactory answer to this question, one must look at the relationship between the Canadian government and Native peoples, and especially at the policies and ideologies of both the federal and provincial Liberals in the 1960s. In 1920 Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy superintendent general for Indian Affairs, told a parliamentary committee: "Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department."<sup>11</sup> This policy was followed strictly until the early 1960s. One could be either a Canadian (a citizen) or a legal Indian (a ward of the Crown under the Indian Act), not both. If one were enfranchised — received citizenship and the right to vote — one lost one's rights as an Indian. Indians only gained the right to be Canadian citizens and still be Indians in 1960, enfranchised federally by the Diefenbaker Conservatives and provincially in Saskatchewan by Tommy Douglas's CCF-NDP. As late as 1969 the federal Liberals, led by Pierre Trudeau and his then Indian Affairs minister, Jean Chrétien, tabled a White Paper that proposed the abolition of all special status for Indians, the abrogation of all treaty rights. Status Indian communities with rights guaranteed by treaties responded with outrage.<sup>12</sup>

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- 10 Douglas Owram, "The Myth of Louis Riel," *Canadian Historical Review* 63 (September 1982): 315-36; reprinted in Hartwell Bowsfield, ed., *Louis Riel: Selected Readings* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), 11-29.
- 11 Duncan Campbell Scott, quoted in Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1992), 211.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 201, 204-05, 213-18, Murray Dobbin, *The One-and-a-Half Men: The Story of Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris, Metis Patriots of the 20th Century* (Vancouver: North Star Books, 1981), 202; James M. Pitsula, "The Saskatchewan CCF Government and Treaty Indians, 1944-64," *Canadian Historical Review* 75 (March 1994): 22-52.

Canada's complex and contradictory classification system of Native peoples also added to the intricacy of the relationships between Native peoples and the government of Saskatchewan. Treaty, or status, Indians lived on reserves and had certain rights, enumerated in their treaties. They did not vote or pay taxes, and they were not subject in wartime to conscription. They also had some particular hunting and fishing rights. They could not homestead or buy alcohol, and their ability to borrow money was curtailed by the fact that reserve lands, even those owned by individuals, could not be used as collateral for loans. Mixed-blood people were not treaty Indians: they could vote, buy liquor, and so forth; the economic constraints upon them were informal, not formal. In addition there were non-status Indians, people of either Indian or mixed blood who for some reason had lost their Indian status, voluntarily or involuntarily: for example an Indian woman who married a man who was not a status Indian lost her treaty rights, and so did her children. Metis and non-status people had no access to reserves or to treaty rights, and they suffered discrimination unless they assimilated so completely that they were not recognized as "Indian" or "Metis." As Antoine Lussier has written, part of the definition of Metis became the condition of being poor and seeming low caste.<sup>13</sup> This dual status system worked in effect as a divide and conquer mechanism for both federal and provincial governments, especially as welfare benefits were generally distributed to treaty Indians by the federal government and to Metis and non-status Indians by the provinces. This division had existed as long as the treaties, and part of the reason Riel had failed in rallying the majority of the Indians to his side in 1885 was the fidelity of the various bands' to their treaty obligations. Although leaders like Norris tried to persuade all aboriginal peoples to present a united front to the Thatcher government at a conference in Saskatoon in 1964, it was clear that the status and non-status peoples had too many differences at stake to speak to Thatcher with one voice.

According to many people in Regina who are interested in the arts or in politics, Thatcher commissioned the Riel statue as a purely political measure. Its formal commissioning allowed him to present himself as a friend of Native people three weeks before an election in which he hoped to attract still newly enfranchised voters in northern ridings and to draw Metis and non-status support away from the NDP. The latter was commonly supposed to have the majority of the Native vote, although since the federal government was Liberal, federal Indian officials were also supposed to have some influence among Native and Metis voters. Thatcher had done something of the sort to attract Conservatives to support him against the

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13 Raymond Breton, Jeffrey G. Reitz, and Victor Valentine, *Cultural Boundaries and the Cohesion of Canada* (Montreal: Institute for Research on Public Policy, 1980), Part 2; Antoine S. Lussier, "The Metis: Contemporary Problems of Identity," in Antoine S. Lussier and D. Bruce Sealey, ed., *The Other Natives: The-Les Métis*, vol. 2, 1885-1978 (Winnipeg: Manitoba Metis Federation Press/Éditions Bois-Brûlés, 1978), 187-92.

NDP, restoring the Diefenbaker family homestead and moving the former Conservative prime minister's cabin to the grounds of the legislative building in Regina. The Riel statue would eventually be placed between the Diefenbaker Homestead and the legislative building.<sup>14</sup> Certainly the timing had the air of electioneering about it: Nugent had originally met with Thatcher in May 1967 and Thatcher had written him in July, saying he was interested in a representational statue. Nugent was not presented with a contract for the work until 22 September 1967, three weeks before the election.

Yet, this argument continues, Thatcher did not really understand the meaning of his pet symbol. Thatcher commissioned a likeness of a man he despised, in order to gain the votes of a group of newly enfranchised Indians who did not like Riel either. Thatcher did not even know that it was not Riel but his lieutenant, Gabriel Dumont, who was the hero of the new generation of Metis leaders, such as University of Saskatchewan professor Howard Adams, whom he hoped to woo. Not only did Thatcher not know Indians, he did not know art. He had wanted a straightforward statue of Riel, dressed in a mackinaw; eventually he compromised with Nugent and accepted a statue that portrayed Riel dressed only in a cloak, under which the viewer may catch a glimpse of the figure's genitals (Figure 3). Like the nudity of the Lemay statue, the partial nudity of the Riel statue was offensive to many aboriginal people, including some devoutly Catholic Metis and perhaps traditionalists from those Plains cultures who held a display of genitalia the rankest possible insult a man could offer anyone. Even the placement of the statue, like the Lemay one, became an issue. Nugent wanted the piece across the lake from the legislative building, defiantly facing the government. The promoters of the "Trial of Louis Riel" play wanted the piece on the grounds of Saskatchewan House, where the play was held.<sup>15</sup> But the piece was placed, instead, to the east of the legislative building, between it and the Diefenbaker Homestead — lost, some viewers felt, in the shrubbery.

A mismatch between art and audience if there ever was one! Thatcher did win the election, though it is doubtful his commissioning of the Riel statue had anything to do with it. The unveiling of the statue the following year did give Thatcher the opportunity to invite Prime Minister Trudeau to Regina and to appear with him and with various Native and Metis leaders. It is very difficult to imagine what Riel may have meant to Ross Thatcher in 1967: his papers have not been archived and they are not available to scholars. Furthermore, public perceptions of Riel have changed enormously

14 Dale Eisler, *Rumours of Glory: Saskatchewan and the Thatcher Years* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1987), 197-98.

15 Author's conversation with John Nugent, Lumsden, Saskatchewan, 23 June, 1994; SAB, memo, Tourist and Convention Committee, 2 May 1967, folder 1967, Administration, Saskatchewan House, #3.2-1224.



Figure 3. John Nugent sculpture, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina. Photo by Don Hall, courtesy of John Nugent and the MacKenzie Art Gallery.

over the last thirty years. He has acquired meanings that block the possibility of meanings he might have had in 1967. A figure as complex and ambiguous as Riel is never likely to be pinned down, and his meaning changes as the needs of his various potential audiences change. But none of that is to say that Thatcher was simply a bungler, creating a colossal joke in his commissioning of the Riel statue. Thatcher was a consummate creator of images: in 1964 he had staged a phoney confrontation over the Medicare crisis that resulted in a famous wireservice photo of him kicking the locked legislative chamber door. He did not win the battle, but he certainly got the image across.<sup>16</sup>

Thatcher needed something like the Riel he tried to create, not so much for the election, though he would not have been averse to milking it for all the political juice it could deliver, but to symbolize what he wanted to do for — or to — Native peoples in the province. Thatcher appears to have been genuinely committed to bettering the squalid living conditions on Saskatchewan reserves and in other status and non-status communities. Although he was generally an irascible man who showed little compassion for anyone, his desire to construct better lives for Native peoples seems to have been sincere and something that he worked at determinedly throughout his terms as premier. Of course, the salvation he offered was on his own terms and had little to do with what Native peoples might want for themselves. Although Thatcher was not a “self-made man” — his father had been moderately successful — he had certainly expanded his father’s assets far beyond their original state, and he believed passionately in capitalism and entrepreneurialism. Socialism, he believed, was a cruel failure, and he thought the “poor Indian” deserved better. Thatcher may not have known anything about art, but he respected a man like Nugent who would stand up to him, and he understood the power of symbols. Whether or not Thatcher ever articulated the goal to himself, he seems to have understood that in his Riel statue — for he had made it *his* Riel statue — he was reinventing the Indian, taking him away from the likes of Malcolm Norris and the NDP and setting him up as the bourgeois, Europeanized, assimilated man.

Given the information available to Ross Thatcher in 1967, especially George Stanley’s 1963 biography (still the standard historical work), he could have interpreted Riel as a symbol of exactly the kind of assimilated person he wanted Native people to become. That is how the NDP had been interpreting all Native and mixed-blood people in the province for decades. True, Riel was French, not English, but his family was bourgeois, he had been educated in eastern Canada, and his early biographers did not tie him either to the fur trade or to the buffalo hunt. Thatcher’s public speeches about Indian people, though often condescending, were consistent in their

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16 Eisler, *Rumours of Glory*, 103-4, photo facing page 142.

horror at conditions on reserves and in other Native and mixed-blood communities in Saskatchewan. There is no reason to doubt Dale Eisler's interpretation of Thatcher as a hard-headed man with a genuinely compassionate streak, though his compassion never extended to empathy. Certainly there was much to elicit compassion for peoples of aboriginal descent. As Murray Dobbin points out, the NDP government in Saskatchewan had set out to regularize both Metis and Indian relationships with the dominant society and provide education for their children, but it had inadvertently moved the peoples of northern Saskatchewan from a credit and subsistence economy of hunting, trapping, and gathering into a cash economy — minus the cash — thus compelling recently self-sufficient but poor people into welfare dependency.<sup>17</sup> And no matter what government policies would have been, increasing Native populations after the 1930s, coupled with a small land base and little market for furs, meant that the northern populations of Saskatchewan would have faced economic and social crisis. Fur trade regulations aimed at securing a decent price for trappers had instead destroyed the credit economy, while school regulations forbade the movement essential to northern subsistence life. Welfare plugged cash into the system but did not replace earlier livelihoods; idleness and the allowing of liquor sales led to increasing problems with alcoholism. For the last thirty years the problems that Ross Thatcher saw when he became premier — and that Native leaders had already been campaigning for decades to change — have changed very little. And Saskatchewan, with the highest proportion of Native population of any province,<sup>18</sup> has done little better than any other province in helping Native peoples reconstitute a viable way of life.

Thatcher was sure that the only possible answer to the woes of Native peoples was assimilation, which was essentially what the CCF-NDP government had been pursuing. At the same time, he knew that complete assimilation, with jobs for everyone, would not be easy to achieve. He had originally campaigned on a promise to help Indians,<sup>19</sup> but his plan was to develop a new provincial department of Native affairs. He started with a special branch on an existing ministry, and then in 1969 brought forth a bill to establish the "Saskatchewan Indian and Metis Department." Speaking for the bill, he said:

The difficulties which we have encountered, to say the least, often have been discouraging and dismaying. Most government problems around here you find can be solved if you want to spend money to do it, but this

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17 Dobbin, *The One-and-a-Half Men*, 183-86; Pitsula, "The Saskatchewan CCF Government and Treaty Indians, 1944-64."

18 Breton, Reitz, and Valentine, *Cultural Boundaries*, 81.

19 Dobbin, *One-and-a-Half Men*, 216.

is not the case with our native problem. Money, of course, can help, but it is by no means the chief difficulty.<sup>20</sup>

Thatcher was convinced that the solution was not just a new bureaucracy, but jobs, jobs, and more jobs. Characteristically, although he talked proudly about the consultation his committee had done, he called for the kind of top-down solution implied by phrases like "our native people" and "our native problem." The new department would place Native people in more civil service jobs and more jobs in the private sector. It would round up more Indian and Metis job candidates, and provide "educational upgrading and job-training programs"<sup>21</sup> and improved housing. Much like Scott, who wanted "not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic," or like the nineteenth-century reformers in the United States who sought to "kill the Indian to save the man," Thatcher consistently sought to integrate Native peoples into the dominant capitalistic society of Saskatchewan. Although the province assured treaty Indians that provincial initiatives would supplement, not supplant, their treaty rights,<sup>22</sup> the clear implication of Thatcher's policies and words, like those of the federal Liberals, was that Indians would have to move from the reserves into the cities and learn to work 8-to-5 jobs like anyone else. Liberal views on Indian affairs were very similar to NDP views, which had stressed the importance of treating all Canadians alike, regardless of the race of an individual: individual rights superseded group rights in the thinking of both parties. Thatcher's candidate for the head of his new "Indian and Metis Department" was Dr. Howard Adams, a Metis professor who had recently returned to the University of Saskatchewan with a Ph.D. Adams, whom the newspapers sometimes dubbed a "second Riel" (though Adams himself believed that Gabriel Dumont had been the real leader of the Metis in 1885) was a radical who, as leader of the Association of Metis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan, criticized the provincial government, but like Riel, he was also highly educated within the Euro-North American system.<sup>23</sup> When Adams turned down the post to stay at the university, Thatcher chose a non-Native for deputy minister — characteristically without consulting anyone in the Native community.

Malcolm Norris or Jim Brady, long-time Metis leaders, could never have had a role in Thatcher's government; in fact, the Liberals fired Norris from the position he held in Prince Albert. Norris and Brady were both ardent socialists, self-educated Marxists who had been teaching cooperation and class struggle in the north and who were the most successful Metis leaders

20 Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan, *Debates and Proceedings, Official Report*, session 1969, 5 March 1969, p. 959.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 960.

22 Cf. Dobbin, *One-and-a-Half Men*, 216-17.

23 George Smellie, "Second Riel — or noisy illusion?" *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, 4 May 1968; "Dumont said main leader," *Regina Leader-Post*, 21 November 1967.

in the province. When W.J. Berezowsky, the NDP MLA from Prince Albert, and a longtime champion of Indian rights, complained that the Liberals had been “persecuting” Norris, David Steuart, Thatcher’s most trusted caucus colleague, explained that he was “a Communist, Bill, and we had no use for him.”<sup>24</sup> Norris had made history part of his activism. He was an admirer of both Riel and Dumont, speaking of their patriotism and attempting to clear their actions of the taint of treason at a 1962 commemorative service at Batoche. Instead of trying to learn from Norris or even to hear Norris’s criticisms of the NDP-CCF policies among Native people, Thatcher rejected him — like abstract sculpture — as something self-evidently beyond the pale.

Thatcher was similarly dismissive of all other arguments against his proposed Indian and Metis Department, and in fact even those MLAs who objected voted for it. Nevertheless, their objections do point out some of what Thatcher deliberately chose to ignore in erecting his Department — and, I would argue, in erecting his statue to Riel. M. Kwasnica, NDP member for Cutknife, mentioned that the people on the reserves in his district favoured putting money directly into a development fund that would finance Indian-run projects on reserves, rather than into a department. Other NDP members suggested that the department should employ at least one-third Native staff, unlike the federal Indian Affairs ministry, which employed white workers almost exclusively. Kwasnica also mentioned that Native culture did not traditionally value personal gain and amassing capital, but rather providing for and protecting others. NDP members made further mention of the need for a type of schooling that encompassed Native values and skills. All emphasized the importance of consulting Native peoples, yet they could hardly stand on the strength of their own record in the north.<sup>25</sup> And so the bill was passed, with the rationale that it was better to do something, even if flawed, for Native peoples in the province than to allow real problems to continue to fester.

If Malcolm Norris and abstract sculpture were clearly anathema to Thatcher and his government, Louis Riel and Howard Adams were, at least to Thatcher’s indomitably ethnocentric way of thinking, forces he might be able to utilize. Adams, like every contemporary Native leader, was controversial, and he soon made it clear that he shared none of Thatcher’s particular views. An articulate leader, writer, teacher, and editor, he still continues to define and establish his own position within and among Native and Euro-Canadian communities nationwide and internationally, because issues of sovereignty, language, education, cultural autonomy, and so on are global issues for Native peoples and the various European and postcolonial societies in their countries. Thatcher may have assumed, in

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24 Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, 12 March 1969, p. 1215.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 1190-1218.

naive ethnocentrism, that anyone with a Ph.D. would “naturally” favour entrepreneurial capitalism and assimilation into the dominant culture. Certainly the underlying assumption of his Indian policy was that integration and assimilation were undeniably beneficial, and that resistance to them denoted a flaw on the part of those who refused:

Far too often we have found that some Indians and Metis are not particularly anxious to take permanent employment. Far too often some have shown little initiative and have assumed little responsibility for their future. If any real solution is to be found, improvement must rest on a strong desire among all Indians and Metis to change their present condition. I am convinced that the great majority, however, want the opportunity to earn a decent living. They want the opportunity to see their children receive a decent education and they want an opportunity to leave welfare behind.<sup>26</sup>

Almost every recent study of Native peoples, from within or without the Native community, by novelists, autobiographers, government scholars, or academics, has confirmed that Native peoples want a “decent living” and opportunities for their children, and that many have worked hard and ingeniously to secure them, sometimes successfully, often not. They have made it clear how failure and poverty can lead to despair and its attendants: alcoholism, drug abuse, incarceration, prostitution, illness, and suicide. And they have also shown us that complete assimilation and integration are not possible in a society that, in many respects, is still racist. Many have shown that, in any case, detribalization is not desirable for many Indian, Metis, and other mixed-blood peoples: group rights or community rights, not just individual civil rights, are part of what Native communities want. Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*, Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree*, Jeanette Armstrong’s *Slash*, and many more recent books by Native writers testify eloquently to the value and necessity of the old ways; but these books come from the decades after Ross Thatcher commissioned a statue of Louis Riel for Regina.

The mid-1960s was a time of vast change in the meaning of symbols throughout North America. The civil rights and black nationalism struggles in the United States, with slogans like “black is beautiful,” were certainly a catalyst for change; but so was Canada’s centennial with its quest to define national and regional heroes, its emphasis on the mosaic rather than the melting pot, and the federal government’s crusade to define the nation as originally *bilingual* and *bicultural*. Native peoples across North America were bringing about their own cultural and political renaissance. Complex and enigmatic, one of the most problematic figures in Canadian history, it is not surprising that Riel should have become a major focus for the redefinition of “Canadian,” “Metis,” and “Native.”

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26 Legislative Assembly, *Debates*, 5 March 1969, pp. 960-61.

Ross Thatcher was not the only one interested in the idea of Louis Riel as part of Saskatchewan's Diamond Jubilee celebrations in 1965; in fact the focus seems originally to have come from, of all places, the Chamber of Commerce. The Jubilee and Centennial committee came up with the idea of presenting a play based on the trial of Louis Riel. According to the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*, "several committee members recalled a unique play they had seen in Deadwood, N.D. [sic], which portrayed the trial of a local outlaw." Looking for something that would draw tourists and promote local history, the committee members thought first of Louis Riel, whose name conjured up a Wild West flavour. "We didn't think we could stage a rebellion in downtown Regina, but we thought perhaps we could do the trial instead," recalled Les Donnelly, one of the original organizers, in 1982.<sup>27</sup> Lacking Wild Bill Hickock, Calamity Jane, or Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Saskatchewan turned to Louis Riel for an outlaw.

John Nugent, the sculptor, knew little about Riel before receiving the commission, but he discovered in the book *Strange Empire*, by American author Joseph Kinsey Howard, a character whom he found intensely appealing. Like Riel, Nugent had had a Catholic education, but while Riel's was classical and ultramontane, Nugent's was in the Catholic worker tradition, with its powerful concern for social justice and its responsibility to the underdog. Riel, leader of his people against overwhelming odds, preferring hanging to a verdict of insanity that would have diminished the significance of his cause, was a figure Nugent could embrace. Riel the man caught Nugent's imagination, despite the fact that he had almost no interest in producing a realistic bronze sculpture of anyone. But with a family to support and a mortgage to pay, Nugent needed the commission: he thus prepared two submissions. One was the representational bronze; the other, which he himself preferred, was a soaring steel abstract inspired by a sculpture commemorating the late Dag Hammarskjöld. Nugent thought Thatcher might accept the abstract because it would use the product of IPSCO, the fledgling Saskatchewan steel plant Thatcher was promoting. Thatcher greeted the abstract characteristically: "What the hell is that?" Nugent argued for the abstract, brought in local art experts to argue for it, and even began to convince Thatcher's cabinet. But the premier would have none of it. He wanted a representation, not a memorial. He wrote Nugent on 13 July 1967 that the government was still interested in a Riel statue: "Perhaps if you could put his true likeness into the face, we might be interested in the proposal in bronze. ... Under no circumstances would I personally be interested in the modernistic proposal." Nugent accepted the commission, but insisted on a classical figure wearing a robe, rather than the purely representational figure Thatcher wanted. For Nugent, this was a figure of "ultimate humiliation," naked and clothed in sackcloth, but still

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27 "Centennial play on Riel becomes theatrical mainstay," *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, 3 June 1982.

defiant, still standing in opposition to government policy, his right hand toward the sky, his head tilted back as if he were seeking divine guidance — or, ominously, as if his neck had been snapped by the hangman's noose. At Thatcher's insistence, the statue was sited "in the shadow of the dome," as Nugent said; but the sculptor's contract gave him the last word on the base for the sculpture. Thatcher had opted for a massive base; Nugent insisted that his humbled Riel be at ground level. Thatcher was furious, but Nugent refused to hand over the statue; and, with Trudeau coming to unveil the piece, the premier had to give in to the sculptor.<sup>28</sup>

At the unveiling of the sculpture, Riel and the statue itself were almost upstaged by university students who used the prime minister's visit to the province as an opportunity to protest government cutbacks in funding for education. The student leaders, cognizant of issues of race and protest, were careful to be polite and to make sure that their protest was aimed at the government and not at the old-time rebel.<sup>29</sup> Nugent was not invited to the unveiling — though Thatcher later claimed that he was — and the Native and Metis leaders who were invited to come were not invited to speak. Instead, Steve Arsenych, the Ukrainian lawyer who had portrayed Riel in the Chamber of Commerce play, recited part of Riel's speech to the jury at his trial.<sup>30</sup> At the request of the Association Culturelle Franco Canadienne in Regina, the inscription on the base of the statue was in French and English.<sup>31</sup> No one thought to include a Cree inscription as well (and one would certainly have been anathema to Thatcher's goal of assimilation).

Except for Nugent, who believed it was not his job, no one seems to have thought to consult Indians or Metis people on anything to do with the statue, although the rather newly enfranchised Indians were the implied audience for the monument — as well as any Metis who could be wooed away from their traditional support of the NDP. Ironically, non-consultation of Native peoples seems to have been a hallmark of both federal and provincial Liberal policy. The same newspaper that carried the photo and story of the unveiling of the statue also carried, in the very next column, a story headlined "Discussion Said Not Necessary," which begins "Indian

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28 John Nugent to author, telephone, 22 June 1994, conversation, 23 June 1994; Thatcher to Nugent, 13 July 1967, original in Nugent's possession. The commission for the statue really did pay Nugent's mortgage in ways he did not anticipate. When it came time to pay the sculptor, the province discovered that, through a small business incentive program, it held the mortgage on the Lumsden studio and, apparently at Thatcher's urging, the commission was applied to the mortgage balance before the sculptor, who had had to purchase all the material himself, received a cash payment. (Documents in Nugent's possession.)

29 Bruce Shepard to author, 12 June 1994, Calgary, Alberta.

30 Nugent to author, 23 June 1994; Ross Thatcher to Jacob Kutarna, 8 October 1968, in Nugent's possession; "Riel statue in Place," *Regina Leader-Post*, 1 October 1968.

31 J.J. Moore, Economic Development Board, to John Nugent, 24 January 1968, in Nugent's possession; SAB, text of inscription in folder 1968, Projects, Nugent's "Riel" statue, #7.6.

Affairs Minister Chrétien said Wednesday he sees no reason to consult Indians on purely administrative changes within his department." Similarly, the story confirming Trudeau's visit to Regina shares the page with a story headlined "Indian Act Like Apartheid."<sup>32</sup> Nugent says sardonically that Thatcher did not consult his own cabinet on the statue, let alone the Indians or Metis.

While Nugent thought of Riel as representing contemporary Metis and Indian issues such as language rights, culturally appropriate schooling, and land rights, the side of Riel that seems to have appealed to Thatcher was the conservative one. Riel was, after all, on one level a successful and thoroughly assimilated man, far more European than Indian; his family was relatively prosperous, his father a miller and a political leader in his own right. Riel was not literally a "half breed," but was genetically  $\frac{7}{8}$  European; French was his first language, though he also knew English, some Cree, and perhaps some Lakota. Like Thatcher, he had had an eastern education. Louis Riel left the Red River as a boy of fourteen, and came home from Montreal a man with a good classical education. His dress was European, except for mocassins; and he was, like most Metis, profoundly Roman Catholic — if at times, after 1870, unorthodox. He was a politician, a writer, and a school master; if he was not an entrepreneur, and certainly not wealthy, he enjoyed the respect of learned men and had "proven himself able to hold down a job." Unlike Gabriel Dumont, he had little direct connection with the buffalo hunt or the "Indian" side of Metis life, except for two or three years in Montana in the early 1880s. He envisaged the North-West as settled by European Catholics, living in harmony with presumably Europeanized and Christianized Indians, and with the Metis as the keystone of society.<sup>33</sup> Although his plans were by many standards bizarre, they unequivocally supported a European social order that nonetheless respected Native rights and traditions.

Three decades after Canada's centennial the definitions of Riel have settled out, at least temporarily. After becoming a western French-Canadian and then a regional hero, he is now primarily a Metis hero and even a Native hero: his enshrinement as a "Father of Confederation" establishes (although arguably in a backhanded way) the third, Native, strand among the founding nationalities of Canada. Scholars and Metis and other mixed-blood communities are now looking at many issues that concern the community but have nothing to do with Louis Riel; yet the icon of Riel seems rather firmly fixed. In 1967, however, Riel's meaning in Canada was fluid and

32 *Regina Leader-Post*, 3 October 1968, 18 September 1968.

33 Most of these details are consistent in all of Riel's biographies. See Joseph Kinsey Howard, *Strange Empire: The Story of Louis Riel* (New York: William Morrow, 1952); George Stanley, *Louis Riel* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1963); Thomas Flanagan, *Louis 'David' Riel: Prophet of the New World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979); and the most recent biography, Maggie Siggins, *Louis Riel: A Life of Revolution* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1994).

open for grabs. As we have seen in the case of the Winnipeg statue, he could be considered a regional hero, the founder of Manitoba and a symbol of collective western resistance to central Canada. For the Regina Chamber of Commerce he was a lively outlaw on whom to base a play that still appeals to tourists interested in the Wild West.

But for Thatcher there was no reason not to reinterpret him — reinvent him — as the new Native, bourgeois and Europeanized, that he was so eager to create then in his own Saskatchewan. Defeated, although both Thatcher and Trudeau acknowledged that he was correct in many of the issues he raised, in his attempt to rise against the government of Canada and the Queen, he was, unlike Gabriel Dumont or Big Bear or Poundmaker, a European man, European dressed, European educated, and European in his antecedents and in his hopes for his family, hopes that were certainly part of his reason for rebelling. Like Xavier Letendre dit Batoche, whose nickname as a place name marches along with the name of Riel, he was a bourgeois who could have expected to prosper in business had he, like Ross Thatcher, not turned away to work for the betterment of his people. In many ways, as Maggie Siggins' new biography of Riel shows, Thatcher's bourgeois Riel is not an improbable reconstruction of the man, who did work consistently for an integration of Euro-Christian and aboriginal societies. His strong Catholic beliefs would have separated him to some extent from a committed socialist such as Malcom Norris, or the Communist party of Saskatchewan, which, like Thatcher, attempted to reconstruct Riel in its own image. Thomas Flanagan's attempts to demonize Riel as an arrogant and scheming fanatic are probably convincing only to readers who share Flanagan's far-right agenda.<sup>34</sup>

The fate of Nugent's Riel has not been quite as lurid as that of Lemay's Riel in Winnipeg, which was seriously vandalized and was only removed after a protest of several days. The Nugent piece has, however, been removed from the legislative grounds: on 31 May 1991, the executive director of the Saskatchewan Family Foundation wrote to John Nugent to inform him "that the Provincial Cabinet has approved a proposal that the statue be removed from its present site, and that it be presented to the MacKenzie Art Gallery to be included in the permanent collection." The Metis community had complained about "the semi-nudity of the statue. ... [T]hey do not regard this image as an acceptable commemoration to Louis Riel." Accordingly, that August, the statue was carted away. There is a certain fitness to its being housed in the MacKenzie Gallery, as the original idea for the aborted sculpture contest had come from the then director of the gallery; but the piece is now merely a work of art, in the vaults of a gallery, to be displayed (maybe) in rotation with other pieces in the permanent collection, not a work of public sculpture for the edification of the entire

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34 See entries under Communist Party in index to SAB; Thomas Flanagan, *Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1983).

citizenry. As a tourist attraction, said Ron Coulson, executive director of Tourism Regina, the value of the statue is "zilch."<sup>35</sup> While it is tempting to see the removal of the statue, like its erection, as a joke, this time engineered by prairie prudery and philistinism, the issue is rather more complex than that.

The controversy over the statue concerned the history of European-style art in the province as well as the history of Native and Metis rights. Sculpture in Saskatchewan now blossoms in many important forms; but, from the point of view of art history, the anniversary of Confederation and the commissioning of the Riel statue came just a few years too early in that province. Both Clement Greenberg, the New York expert whom the original panel had asked to select a sculpture, and John Nugent, the actual sculptor, were associated with Emma Lake, the site of a very successful summer school of art in northern Saskatchewan. Under Greenberg's leadership, it had espoused the cause of high Modernism, formal and abstract, its values embodied in the steel memorial that Nugent wished to erect to Riel. The Emma Lake school's dominance in sculpture was challenged in the late 1960s and early 1970s when David Gilhooly, Joe Fafard, David Thauberger, and Victor Cicansky arrived in Regina and joined the faculty of the university art department. Fafard, himself a Francophone from Saskatchewan, rejected modernist formalism for a playful and highly polished yet self-consciously "primitive" style shared and influenced by the other three and by a growing group of Regina artists. Fafard would become one of the detractors of Nugent's sculpture, telling the newspaper when the piece was removed that "It's an awkward piece that is completely melodramatic and it seems to me it does not speak the language of sculpture. I agree with its removal. I think it should have never been accepted." Fafard himself produced a Riel and a Dumont, part of a series in ceramic he made from 1975 to 1979 that honoured men like his own father as well as the people of his small town — Pense, Saskatchewan — and the people involved in the area's history. Perhaps his Riel would have been more to the taste of Thatcher, the Metis community, and even the general public than Nugent's sculpture. But it was too late for the occasion and the monumental kind of thing that Thatcher had in mind could not have been produced by Fafard until he opened his own foundry.<sup>36</sup> The rivalry between the formal Emma Lake school and the representational postmodernism of Fafard, Cicansky, and their associates, plus the fact that Nugent's Riel was a departure from his own definitive style, something he himself regarded as a pot boiler,

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35 Keith Rogers, executive director Saskatchewan Family Foundation, to Nugent, 31 May 1991, original in Nugent's possession; Kevin O'Connor, "Riel statue to be moved," *Regina Leader-Post*, 2 August 1991.

36 Fafard quoted in *Regina Leader-Post*, 8 August 1991; John O'Brian, ed., *The Flat Side of the Landscape: The Emma Lake Artists' Workshops* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 1989), esp. 55-58; Matthew Teitelbaum and Peter White, *Joe Fafard: Cows and Other Luminaries 1977-1987* (Saskatoon and Regina: Mendel Art Gallery and Dunlop Art Gallery, 1987).

undermined support for Nugent's Riel within the Saskatchewan arts community. Given the wealth of present sculptural tradition in Saskatchewan and the enormous popularity of Joe Fafard's cows or Bill Epp's figures, it is hard to remember how rare sculpture was in the province in 1967.

Disputes in the arts establishment, however, were never the main issue concerning Nugent's Riel. As we have seen in discussing the Lemay statue, the depiction of a hero in utter humiliation is not a luxury that people who are themselves oppressed can easily afford. And the issue of Riel and nudity is a particularly delicate subject because it is linked to the question of Riel and insanity. Riel was confined to two insane asylums in Quebec from 6 March 1876 to 23 January 1878.<sup>37</sup> Upon this confinement, Riel's non-Metis, French-Canadian lawyers built his defence at the trial. He was, they maintained, insane on the subjects of politics and religion; if he was insane, he was not responsible for his actions at Batoche and could not be hanged. One of the greatest concerns of Riel's friends at the time he was admitted to the asylum was his tendency to rend his garments and cast them from him<sup>38</sup>: thus a naked Riel can be seen as a mad Riel. And as Riel insisted with great dignity, when he was finally, and too late, permitted to speak at his own trial, he was not insane at Batoche but was a patriot, making a legitimate case for the rights of his people. Riel's followers have, like the Metis chief himself, steadfastly maintained that he was a diplomat, a patriot, and even a prophet, not a poor crazy martyr doing he knew not what. The naked, tormented Riel of both statues is uncomfortably close to the naked and insane Riel evoked by his own defence lawyers who, not westerners or of mixed blood themselves, seemed not to have understood Riel's need to vindicate his actions and his thinking.

Although there is not room here to argue Riel's sanity, the question is clearly relevant to understanding portrayals of the man. Historians have only glancingly linked Riel to the Messianic traditions of various Native peoples of North America in the early 1880s, although he has been linked to millenarian leaders elsewhere in the world and among Euro-North Americans; but his mental state may be best understood in comparison to other Messianic Native leaders in North America in the late nineteenth century.<sup>39</sup> Although the Ghost Dance did not come to Riel's contacts among the Sioux until after his death, other millennial movements were in full swing during Riel's years in Montana; and his close relations with a number of different peoples in an area that was something of a cultural crossroads could surely have introduced him to the ideas of Wovoka or Smohalla. Certainly James

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37 Stanley, *Louis Riel*, 224-26.

38 Flanagan, *Louis 'David' Riel*, 57, 64.

39 Manfred Mossmann, "The Charismatic Pattern: Canada's Riel Rebellion of 1885 as a Millenarian Protest Movement," *Prairie Forum* 10 (Fall 1985): 307-25; reprinted in Bowsfield, ed., *Louis Riel*, 227-45. See also Gilles Martel, *Le messianisme de Louis Riel* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984).

Mooney's explanation of the rise of the Ghost Dance and similar revivals among other Indian groups rings true for the Metis. Explains Raymond DeMaillie, quoting Mooney:

when a tribe found its very existence threatened, a prophet would arise "who strives to avert the disaster by molding his people to a common purpose through insistence upon the sacred character of his message." This, he concluded, led to rebellion: "Thus it is found that almost every great Indian warlike combination has had its prophet messenger in the outset, and if all the facts could be known we should probably find the rule universal."<sup>40</sup>

In the 1870s and 1880s religious revivals arose among the Paiutes in Utah and Nevada, and among the Cayuse and other peoples of the Columbia basin. Both were Messianic religions with marked Christian elements, and Riel could have been aware of both of them.

Riel's own travails and concerns for the Metis could have led him to develop the same kinds of doctrines evoked by other Native leaders, not only in North America but worldwide: from the Highlanders supporting Bonnie Prince Charlie with their claymores against the eighteenth-century English muskets at Culloden, to the "Mad Mullah" of Somalia fighting airplanes with spears and camels in the beginning of this century, to contemporary fighters against colonial rule in Angola.<sup>41</sup> Like Riel, the Native prophets of North America in the 1870s and 1880s were given to behaviour that struck ordinary white observers — and even some of their own tribespeople and followers — as insane or threatening; but, like Riel, they also preached peace, brotherhood, and reconciliation. What Mooney says of Smohalla could be interpolated into biographies of Riel, and no reader would be the wiser. Even Riel's detractors' suspicions of his honesty and devotion to the cause have their echoes in Mooney's descriptions of Smohalla: "We have to deal with the same curious mixture of honest conviction and cunning deception that runs through the history of priestcraft in all the ages." Insanity itself seems to be a part of the mixture: "If genius be a form of insanity, as has been claimed, intense religious enthusiasms would seem to have a close connection with physical as well as mental disease. Like Mohammed and Joan of Arc, and like the Shaker prophet of Puget Sound, Smohalla is subject to cataleptic trances."<sup>42</sup>

Riel was no more unreasonable than Smohalla or the men he knew among the Lakotas who became Ghost Dancers in 1889 and 1890. The Metis, like the Lakotas, the Crees, the Blackfeet, the Assiniboines, and the other Native peoples of the northern Plains, were hopelessly outnumbered and

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40 Raymond J. DeMaillie, "Introduction," in James Mooney, *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), xxii.

41 See Margaret Laurence, *The Heart of a Stranger* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976).

42 Mooney, *Ghost-Dance Religion*, 720, 719.

outgunned. Although Gabriel Dumont and his troops could have carried out successful guerrilla warfare against the North West Mounted Police and the expeditionary forces under General Middleton, the Canadians would most likely have retaliated in the way that had been so very effective south of the border: burn out the villages. If the United States Cavalry defeated the Lakotas by burning the Dull Knife village in deep mid-winter and forcing old people and children into the snow with little clothing, their horses shot and their food burned; if they humbled the Blackfeet by massacring the Heavy Runner village, the Canadians could have borrowed the tactics — as they borrowed the Gatling gun at Batoche. The Metis settlements, far more sedentary than the lodges of the Plains tribes, would have fallen even more easily. Ontario soldiers, as it was, ransacked Gabriel Dumont's house and made away with his billiard table and his wife, Madeleine's, precious washing machine, as well as sacking other homes.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Riel and Dumont had little overt support among the majority of Metis communities in the North-West. Saint Albert, outside Fort Edmonton, the largest Metis settlement west of Red River, stayed out of the hostilities of 1885, as did Qu'Appelle. Even at Batoche, a significant number of Metis may have opposed Riel. The clergy had supported Riel in 1869-70 but for the most part opposed him in 1884-85. Even those Metis who believed in Riel were hesitant to support him in the face of the priests' disapproval; there is no reason to suppose any of the other settlements would have sustained a guerrilla campaign.

Riel was perfectly sane in recognizing it would take a miracle to protect his people: that no miracle was forthcoming reflects more on the nature of faith than of sanity. Both Riel and his opponents, after all, believed in a Jesus who doubted and cried aloud his forsakenness as he died on the cross. Early Christianity itself was the mystic defiance of a technologically superior society — the Romans — by a colonized minority — a small sect of Jews. Riel was steadfast in a tradition of martyr saints broken on the wheel; and it may be that his miracle has come, in a secular guise befitting a secular age, in the cultural and social renaissance of the Metis and other aboriginal peoples since 1968. The fact that most Plains Indians did not join Riel's rebellion is not so much a reflection on the justice of Riel's claims or the relative suffering of the Metis as it is on the leadership of different societies. Only the Metis had a Messianic leader—and only part of that settlement followed his vision.

Christian hagiography is, of course, replete with images of nude, gaunt saints and martyrs; its central figure is the semi-nude and tortured Christ on the cross. Canada has its Brébeuf. Both the Lemay and Nugent statues present Riel in this mode. In this sense, Nugent's Riel is diametrically opposed to the Riel in mackinaw and toque that Thatcher himself wanted.

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43 George Woodcock, *Gabriel Dumont: The Metis Chief and His Lost World* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1975), 215.

But as Riel's image has evolved since 1968, he has become a national hero, not a Christian martyr. (Strangely enough, Nugent points out that Thatcher himself took on some of the attributes Nugent had seen in Riel. Thatcher thought of himself as a prophet—during his 1964 campaign he told an aide, "Everyone has a place in this world, and I believe I've been chosen by God to get rid of these socialists."<sup>44</sup> After Thatcher lost the election in 1971 he was deserted by his colleagues, and Nugent said he felt sorry for the man, utterly humiliated as he was. A month later Thatcher was dead. Thatcher is memorialized on the legislative building grounds by a rather abstract-looking stone bench, not far from where the statue of Louis Riel once stood.)

The primary audience for representations of Riel is Metis; and most of that audience, to the extent it owns Riel as a national hero, wants to see the secular diplomat, not the martyr prophet with hints of madness and irrationality. Not all Metis agree on this or anything else, however, and in protest of the removal of the Lemay sculpture in Winnipeg, Jean Allard, a former NDP MLA in Manitoba, prime mover in the original erection of the statue, and great-grandson of a first cousin of Riel, chained himself to the statue to protest its dismantlement and move to St. Boniface College. Sculptor Marcien Lemay joined in the protest. Nevertheless, when the movers actually approached the statue, the protestors offered no resistance, and the Riel sculpture was taken down and carted off to a warehouse, pending its re-erection at the College of St. Boniface.<sup>45</sup> For Clifford Laroque, Regina chapter president of the Metis Society of Saskatchewan, speaking to reporters in 1991, the Regina statue was "demoralizing for Metis people and historically inaccurate." "This has been a thorn in the side of the Metis people for years," Laroque said. "If that's the kind of recognition we're going to get, they might as well throw it in the lake." Jim Durocher, president of the Metis Society of Saskatchewan, described the kind of statue the Metis would like: "realistic, dignified and respectful," recognizing "Riel for the hero he is." He added, "We want to make sure that Riel is not standing there with his testicles hanging down. Riel was a very important person in our history."<sup>46</sup>

Any group clearly has the right to define its own national hero and to disagree among themselves on that representation. The Metis certainly have reason to resent being shown as perpetual victims at the hands of the triumphant Euro-Canadians: Brébeuf, the closest thing, except for Riel, to a national martyr saint was, after all, French; the entire tableau of his martyrdom is of one who goes before, whose death paves the way for the

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44 Eisler, *Rumours of Glory*, 129.

45 Allard, *As It Happens*; *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 21 July 1994, p. A12; *Calgary Herald*, 24 July 1994.

46 "Sculptor says we're 'illiterate'," *Regina Leader-Post*, 6 August 1991; Kevin O'Connor, "Riel statue to be moved," *Regina Leader-Post*, 2 August 1991; Muriel Draaisma, "Regina statue panned," *Regina Leader-Post*, 9 August 1991.

successful conquest and conversion of the Iroquois by the Christians. In comparison, Riel's defeat is a defeat from which his people, more than a century later, still suffer. While the Jesuit is the martyr, his torturers are "savages," the flip side of the victim in the iconography of the Native peoples of the Americas. At a time when aboriginal peoples are still very much victims, a tortured martyr is not a useful national image; and then there is the problem of vandalism and disrespectful children, peeping and tittering.

Not surprisingly, the letters to the editor protesting the decision to take down the Regina statue are from Euro-Canadians. Rand E. Teed, a high school art teacher from Regina, wrote to praise the statue as presenting "the memory of Riel as an incredibly strong, intense and spiritual person who was reaching to grasp the future for his people." Muriel K. Griffin, an English immigrant, also wrote to praise the piece: "The statue is graceful and portrays an idealist with dignity. It belongs to no particular century in terms of artistic expression."<sup>47</sup> Different audiences need different kinds of art. The Metis community as a group did not have a part in picking the design for either of the Riel statues of the 1960s. Instead these came out of dialogues between governments and sculptors. The Regina sculpture represented a compromise that was not entirely satisfactory either to Ross Thatcher or to John Nugent, and that was wholly unsatisfactory to modern Metis leaders. The alternatives to the two sculptures are, perhaps ironically, quite close to what Ross Thatcher had wanted.

Since 1968 the Winnipeg area has received three new sculptures of Riel, in addition to a representation on his new and newly carved tombstone; and a fourth statue, also crafted by Lemay, and intended to replace the old one, had progressed to the maquette stage before the Manitoba Metis Federation cancelled its agreement with Lemay and asked another Franco-Manitoban artist, Miguel Joyal, to design a new statue. This piece, now erected on a plaza directly behind the Legislative Building (still not beside Queen Victoria), shows almost the same pose as the maquette of the second Lemay Riel. In Regina the former statue has been replaced by a cairn memorializing not Louis Riel but the *trial* of Louis Riel, and erected by the producers of the play, the *Trial of Louis Riel*, and by the Chamber of Commerce. The cairn (Figure 4) is only a few metres from a conventional bronze statue of Riel's nemesis, Sir John A. Macdonald, identified simply as "Father of Confederation." A bit of the rope used to hang Riel remains on display at the RCMP Museum, a few kilometres away on Dewdney Avenue. Meanwhile, in Saskatoon the student centre at the University of Saskatchewan is named Place Louis Riel, and a large equestrian statue of Gabriel Dumont, the face an unquestionably good likeness, stands in the park that runs along the river. Across the roadway from Dumont is a plaque memorializing Captain

47 *Regina Leader-Post*, n.d. (c. September 1991) and 9 September 1991, clippings in possession of John Nugent.

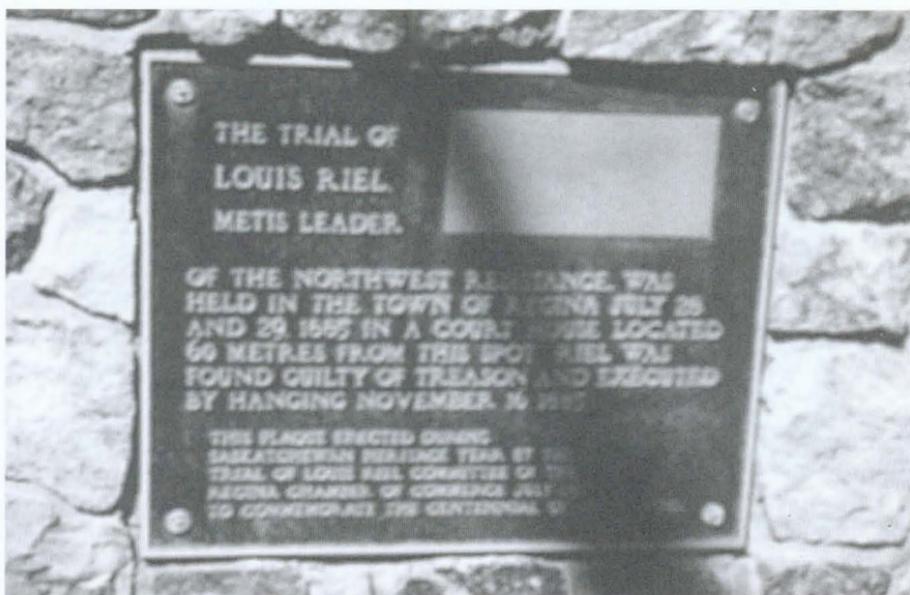


Figure 4. Trial of Louis Riel cairn, Regina. Photo by Frances Kaye.

E.S. Andrews, the skipper of the steamer *Northcote* that joined Middleton's men against the Metis at Batoche. For some reason there is at present no plaque on the Dumont statue identifying either the figure or the sculptor, Bill Epp. A smaller version of the same bronze equestrian Dumont is on display at the museum at Batoche.

The three recent Riel representations in Winnipeg, as well as Lemay's rejected maquette, demonstrate what most contemporary Metis citizenry want as a representation of a national hero: all are portraits, even more deliberate and realistic than the equestrian Dumont. The centennial of the hero's death, 1985, saw two new Riel statues commissioned, both finished and erected in 1986. One is in St. Norbert, now a southern suburb of Winnipeg, one of the original Metis settlements in the Red River Valley and the site of Riel's election to Parliament. The sculpture is a granite relief, commissioned by a St. Norbert group and carved in New Hampshire (Figure 5).<sup>48</sup> On the left a panel shows the young Riel in a coat, a proclamation rolled in his right hand (rather like that proffered by Sir John A. Macdonald in the statue of him in Regina); on the right is Father Ritchot, the revolutionary priest whose support was integral to Riel's successes in Red River. Between the two is a plaque surmounted by the crest of the province of Manitoba and bearing quotations from Ritchot and Riel, though Riel's words are taken from the North-West Rebellion of 1885 rather than, more

48 "Sir John A. would envy all Riel's statues," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 20 April 1986.

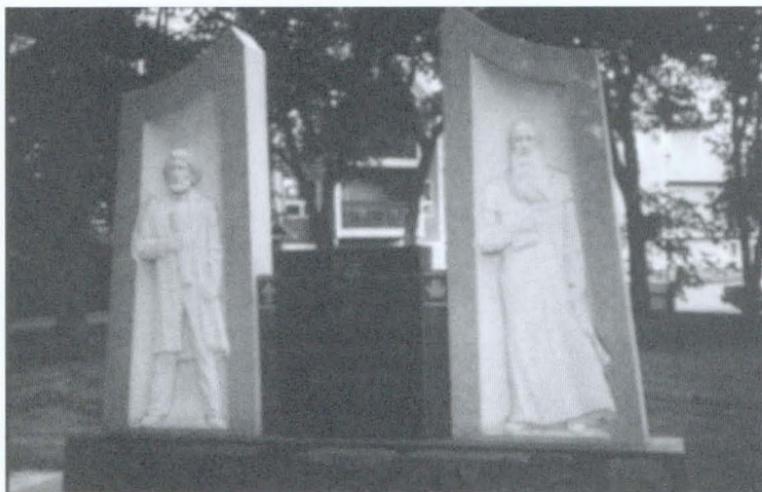


Figure 5. Riel-Richtot monument, St. Norbert. Photo by Frances Kaye.



Figure 6. Tombstone of Louis Riel, St. Boniface. Photo by Frances Kaye.

appropriate to the site, the Red River Rebellion. Beneath the figures is a frieze showing the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, with modern Winnipeg in the centre, buffalo on the left, canoes on the river, and tipis and Metis fields to the right. Sited in front of the parish church and across the street from a shrine, the piece resembles a tombstone. It is, in fact, similar in style and material to Riel's tombstone in St. Boniface (Figure 6), done in his likeness for the centennial of his death. The second Riel statue in Winnipeg, also commissioned for the centennial of his death, is a giant bust on a pillar, overlooking the river in St. Boniface, near the point where Louis Riel Sr.'s millstones were moved to form a cairn at the Musée de St. Boniface in the late 1960s. The bust, intended as a portrait, is accurate and heroically noble (Figure 7).

The third statue, the Joyal piece, like the proposed second Lemay piece, is a photographic likeness showing Riel with a rolled document in one hand, similar to the depiction in the relief at St. Norbert or the Macdonald in Regina. Riel is dressed in conventional European-style clothing of the nineteenth century, except that he wears, as was the man's real wont, Indian-style moccasins (Figure 8).<sup>49</sup> Ironically, the moccasins may eventually make this seemingly uncontroversial statue seem disrespectful as tastes change. One of the earliest published descriptions of Louis Riel is William Butler's in *The Great Lone Land* (1872), in which the writer suggests that Riel's footwear makes the Metis chief look ridiculous: "He was dressed in a curious mixture of clothing — a black frock-coat, vest, and trousers; but the effect of this somewhat clerical costume was not a little marred by a pair of Indian moccasins, which nowhere look more out of place than on a carpeted floor."<sup>50</sup>

The original Lemay statue has been re-erected at St. Boniface College, though the representation remains controversial (Figure 9). But perhaps Aurèle Desaulniers, president of the Comité centenaire Louis Riel, which erected the St. Boniface bust, has best stated audience reaction to the disputed sculpture: "For ordinary people like myself, the biggest percentage don't feel Louis Riel in that particular statue."<sup>51</sup> For others, though, like Allard and Lemay, the nudity and vulnerability of the man in the sculpture vividly portray the troubles of the Metis people.

Although some historians prefer to shift the focus in Metis studies away from Riel and onto the survivals and successes of all the mixed-blood descendants of the fur trade, the complexities and ambiguities of Riel's life and death will keep his memory perpetually alive, simply because he can mean so many things to so many people. Aspiring bourgeois, regional rebel, visionary cultural revivalist, penitent prophet, Messianic hero, charismatic

49 "Statue rejuvenates Louis Riel," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 13 May 1994.

50 William F. Butler, *The Great Lone Land* (1872; Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1968), 133.

51 "Sir John A. would envy all Riel's statues," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 20 April 1986.



Figure 7. Bust of Louis Riel, St. Boniface.  
Photo by Frances Kaye.

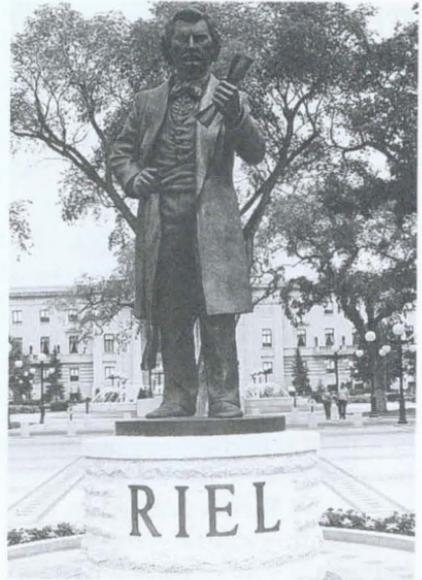


Figure 8. Miguel Joyal sculpture, Winnipeg.  
Photo by Howard Kaye.



Figure 9. Marcien Lemay sculpture and Etienne Gaboury shield, 1996 installation, St. Boniface. Photo by Howard Kaye.

fanatic, sure-headed diplomat, classically trained educator, revolutionary leader — he can play the part of any of these, responding to the needs of various audiences over time, including those who applaud him, those who excoriate him, and those who think he is largely irrelevant to the story of the Metis of North America. But whatever he was and is, he was Metis, devoted to his followers, willing to spend his life in their cause — though hoping to survive and prosper rather than to hang as the leader of his people. When Gabriel Dumont came to fetch him back to Canada after he had settled in Montana and become an American citizen, he came because he believed it was his duty before his god and his country. And now, if the Manitoba Metis Federation and the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan come to bid him back from the dead to stand as a public image of a Metis who succeeded in terms of European education and leadership, he will come back as faithfully. And if racism and ethnocentrism ease to the extent that Metis society is comfortable in showing their national hero as a martyr to a cause that eventually triumphed, in the vaults of the MacKenzie Art Gallery there is a rough bronze of a man in sackcloth and utter humiliation, but still defiant. In any important form, Louis Riel is with us all and particularly with his own people, the Metis.

#### NOTES

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