

"Conspiracy and Treason": The Red River Resistance From an Expansionist Perspective

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ABSTRACT. This paper is an attempt to explain why the Red River resistance of 1869-1870 became a major source of controversy between English and French Canadians. In order to do this it looks at the rebellion from the perspective of those English-Canadian Protestants who most opposed it, and identifies four phases, whose cumulative effect was to aggravate the rebellion and its significance to those in central Canada. First, by the time the resistance began, English Canadian "expansionists" had developed certain presuppositions which led them to assume that the Métis were simply the dupes of more powerful and dangerous forces. Second, this belief led to the conclusion that any attempt to conciliate the Métis would be pointless as the Métis were not the real source of the rebellion. Third, the hard line of these extremists led to a growing concern in French Canada which did not have the same assumptions about a wider "conspiracy". Fourth, this French-Canadian attitude led many expansionists to believe that the real conspiracy was centred in Quebec and its representatives in the government. By the end of the resistance, various tensions had therefore been created. Mutual suspicions in French and English Canada aroused fears of extremism on both sides, and relations between the two groups deteriorated. Moreover, many English Canadians viewed any attempt by the government to encourage French Catholic institutions in Manitoba as part of a larger plot to give French Canada cultural supremacy across the entire North West. English Canada thus became increasingly insistent that an English uni-racial society be the cultural medium for western development. The Métis were subsequently viewed as an extension of French Canada and not as a distinct community with its own goals and needs.

RESUME

Cet exposé essaye d'expliquer pourquoi le mouvement de résistance de la Rivière Rouge de 1869-1870, devint une source de conflit entre les Canadiens Anglais et Français. Pour cela, cet exposé envisage la rébellion du point de vue des Canadiens Anglais Protestants qui s'y opposaient le plus, et identifie quatre phases, dont l'effet cumulatif n'a fait qu'aggraver la rébellion, et sa signification pour ceux habitant la région centrale du Canada. D'abord, lorsque le mouvement de résistance a commencé, les "expansionnistes" Canadiens Anglais avaient déjà acquis certains préjugés qui les amenaient à croire que les Métis étaient simplement les dupes de forces plus puissantes et plus dangereuses. Deuxièmement, cette conviction leur a permis de conclure que toute tentative de conciliation avec les Métis serait vaine, car les Métis n'étaient pas la véritable source de la rébellion. Troisièmement, l'attitude dure de ces extrémistes a fait naître une inquiétude croissante au Canada Français qui ne partageait pas les mêmes présomptions quant à une conspiration plus étendue. Quatrièmement, cette attitude canadienne française a amené bien des expansionnistes à croire que la vraie conspiration était centrée au Québec, et que ses représentants étaient au sein du gouvernement. À la fin du mouvement de résistance, des tensions diverses avaient ainsi été créées. Au Canada français et au Canada anglais des soupçons mutuels attisaient la peur d'attitudes extrémistes des deux côtés, et les relations entre les deux groupes se sont détériorées. En outre, bien des Canadiens Anglais considéraient toute tentative du gouvernement à encourager la création d'institutions catholiques et françaises au Manitoba, comme élément d'un complot bien plus vaste, visant à donner au Canada Français la suprématie culturelle dans tout le Nord Ouest. Le Canada anglais a ainsi insisté de plus en plus pour qu'une société uniquement anglophone soit le médium culturel pour le développement de l'Ouest. En conséquence, les Métis étaient considérés comme une extension du Canada Français, et non comme une communauté distincte, avec ses propres buts et ses propres besoins.

In the autumn of 1869 a group of Métis under the leadership of Louis Riel forcibly prevented William McDougall from entering Red River. McDougall was Canada's governor designate for this territory, which was expected to soon become a part of the Dominion, and the Métis refusal to let him enter marked the beginning of what

was to become known as the Red River resistance. It would take nearly nine months, the creation of a new province and the presence of a military force before the North West truly became a part of Canada. Through the intervening period the Métis continued by force of arms to assert their right to be consulted on their own future, while the Conservative government of John A. Macdonald sought to repair past carelessness and to find a compromise solution. Standing between these two parties and working to prevent any agreement was an informal coalition made up of expansionists and nationalists in Ontario and the pro-annexation "Canada Party" in Red River.

History has not been kind to these men who were most extreme in their opposition to the Métis. They have been assigned much of the blame both for the outbreak of the rebellion and for increasing the problems in the way of a solution.¹ Even more seriously, they have been accused of bringing unnecessary racial and religious prejudices to the surface, thereby undermining the understanding between French and English Canada that was essential to national unity.² Descriptions of their tragi-comic military efforts in Red River and their paranoid rhetoric in Ontario have ensured that the image presented to successive generations has been of a dangerous and slightly ludicrous group of fanatics.

Much of the criticism is justified. The economic designs of Canadians on the Red River settlement and their arrogance in assuming the right to impose these designs encouraged the Métis resistance to the transfer. Emotional meetings in the East and attempts to arrest delegates from Red River aggravated an already tense situation and brought forth the spectre of racial conflict. Even if the main points of these traditional interpretations are accepted, however, two questions arise. First, what provoked these men to take such an extreme position? What distinguished the analysis of men like George Brown, Charles Mair and John Christian Schultz from that of other English Canadians, including John A. Macdonald, who saw the Métis action as a political problem and acted accordingly? Second, how was it that a rebellion on the banks of the Red River became a major threat to French-English relations in Canada? French Canadians had never closely identified the Métis with their own culture, and when the rebellion began the French-language press differed little in its reactions from its English counterpart.³ Yet within a few months the resistance of the Métis became a symbol to many in both French and English Canada of their own position in the young Dominion.

In order to answer these questions, it is useful to view the Red River resistance through the eyes of those who most opposed it. In retrospect it is apparent that many of their attitudes were the result of misconceptions and prejudice. Nevertheless, given the assumption from which they operated, their actions were fairly consistent through-

out. They were motivated not by a vindictive desire to obliterate a weaker culture in the West, but by a fear that others were manipulating these people for conspiratorial ends. They felt it their duty to unmask the true conspiracy that lay behind Métis actions. In attempting to do so, they transformed and aggravated the whole nature of the rebellion.

The reaction of those who took the hardest line during the rebellion was largely predetermined by their enthusiastic acceptance of the twelve-year campaign for annexation of the North West to Canada. Since 1857 groups in English Canada had been calling for the immediate transfer of the Hudson's Bay Territories, and those who figured prominently in the events of 1869–1870 were among the most ardent supporters of this movement.⁴ From the beginning Canadian expansionism had been predicated on the assumption that the inhabitants of the Hudson's Bay Territories were unhappy with Company rule. The petitions presented to the Colonial Secretary by Alexander Isbister in the 1840s and the resistance of the Métis to Hudson's Bay Company rule in the Sayer trial had been factors in stirring Canadian interest.⁵ By 1857, when the expansionist movement in Canada came into its own, the links between Canadian desires and supposed discontent in Red River had grown even stronger. The assumption had developed that there was a community of interest between Canada and Red River.⁶ It was truly, if conveniently, believed that, as Isbister said, "the unanimous desire of the inhabitants of the Hudson's Bay Territories is to have the entire region annexed to Canada."⁷

During the expansionist campaign this belief was reinforced by numerous petitions from Red River. The pattern was set in the summer of 1857 when a petition with some 574 signatures was sent to Canada praying for the development of the region.⁸ From then until 1869 numerous other petitions flowed eastward to Canadian and British authorities. Resolutions such as the one of January 1867 asking "to be united with the Grand Confederation of British North America" encouraged the idea that the extension of Canada's frontier was a two-way process.⁹ Of course, a good many of these petitions were of a questionable nature, having the support of but a relatively small segment of Red River's population. Expansionists were not aware of this, however, and few in Red River who opposed the resolutions made their concerns known in the East. Canadian expansionists had neither reason nor the desire to doubt their authenticity, and the impression thus continued to grow that the settlers of Red River wanted annexation.

Actively encouraging this assumption were those expansionists who migrated west in the wake of the expansionist campaign and settled in Red River. They were to become known both by contempo-

raries and by history as the "Canada Party." This group's membership was succinctly defined in 1869 as being "those who favor annexation to Canada."¹⁰ These individuals, centred around the young Dr. John Christian Schultz, had been the force behind many of the petitions that had originated in Red River. It is not surprising that these men, having made a material and personal commitment to the development of the North West, attempted to encourage annexation.

The Canada Party had an especially strong influence in shaping the Canadian image of Red River because it controlled the *Nor'Wester*, the only newspaper published in the North West. In 1859 two English-born journalists, William Buckingham and William Coldwell, arrived in Red River from Canada. Both had previously worked for George Brown at the *Globe*, and when they moved west they took not only their type and their practical experience in journalism but also a set of attitudes formed in Canadian expansionist circles. They founded Red River's first newspaper in order to further spread their expansionist views. Over the next several years the editorship of this paper would change hands many times, but it would remain a consistent advocate of the idea of Canadian expansion.

It is questionable whether the *Nor'Wester* did much to encourage support for Canada among the inhabitants of Red River. The *Nor'Wester*, like the Canada Party itself, proved a disruptive addition to the already unstable social structure of Red River in the 1860s and may have served to alienate rather than promote support for annexation to Canada.¹¹ Even if such was the case, the influence of the *Nor'Wester* on Canadian expansion cannot be discounted. As every editor of the paper sensed, as much could be accomplished in the name of Canadian expansion in the East as in the West. The real impact of the paper was not among its readers in Red River but in a constituency thousands of miles away. As John Schultz said, "by it we are not only influenced here but judged abroad." The *Nor'Wester* was "the light-house on our coast — the beacon that lets men know we are here."¹²

From Buckingham and Coldwell through James Ross, Schultz and W. R. Brown, the editors of the *Nor'Wester* realized that their paper could act as a spur to the eastern expansionists, and their style reflected that realization. As the only newspaper in the North West between 1859 and annexation, the *Nor'Wester* had a near monopoly on the interpretation of events in that region. Expansionists in the East, in turn, welcomed the information which the *Nor'Wester* provided as reliable and interesting. Editorials and opinions of the *Nor'Wester* were frequently printed in the Canadian papers and often served as the basis for their own editorial stance. Among Canadian expansionists a subscription to the *Nor'Wester* became a badge of membership in the campaign for annexation.¹³ At times it even seemed as if the paper's real readers were not the inhabitants of Red River

at all but the eastern expansionist community. When the *Nor'Wester* ran a special supplement on the formation of a Scientific Institute in Red River, none of the supplements reached the local populace for, as the paper unapologetically pointed out, "the whole impression [has] been mailed to foreigners."¹⁴

The *Nor'Wester* and the Canada Party worked consistently to convince their eastern audience not only of the potential of the land but of the urgent desire of the people to cast off the yoke of the Hudson's Bay Company. Attacks on Company rule were a consistent part of the paper's policy and, by at least the latter 1860s, it repeatedly argued that the best solution was annexation to Canada.¹⁵ Further, many of the petitions which reached the East from Red River had their origins, and much of their support, in the group surrounding the paper. The petition presented by Sandford Fleming to the Canadian and British governments in 1863 was a case in point.¹⁶ The meetings which led to this petition were headed by none other than the two current editors of the *Nor'Wester*, James Ross and William Coldwell.¹⁷

Thus, if the Canada Party was less than successful in its attempt to convert the people of Red River to annexation, the same cannot be said for its mission to convince Canadians that the settlement was ready and willing to join with them. The fictional and malicious character, Cool, in Alexander Begg's *Dot-It-Down* summed it up when he said that "Canada has had an eye to the North West for some years past, and is only too ready and willing to swallow anything that is said against the Honorable Company, whether true or not."¹⁸ Expansionists had long believed that by bringing British progress and liberties to the North West they were a "ray of light" in a dark region, and when the *Nor'Wester* confirmed their opinions they found no reason to doubt it.¹⁹ As the time for the transfer approached they confidently assumed, in the words of Charles Mair, that it was the unanimous desire of the people of Red River to possess "the unspeakable blessings of free Government and civilization."²⁰

A second factor determining the expansionist attitude was the fact that the rebellion was primarily a movement of the French half-breed population. The men who had prevented McDougall's entry into the North West had all been French-speaking, Catholic, half-breeds. Throughout the rebellion McDougall and those who shared his outlook saw the Métis as acting alone. It was believed, whether accurately or not, that the Canadians, English half-breeds and Europeans in the settlement were opposed to Riel. In other words the expansionists were convinced that the resistance had its origin and support in only one section of the population of Red River.

Until the rebellion, neither the Canadian government nor the expansionists had paid much attention to the Métis. The Sayer trial

and the appearance of French names on various petitions had encouraged the assumption that their opinions were indistinguishable from those of the other segments of Red River's population. This is hardly surprising, given eastern reliance on the Canada Party and the *Nor'Wester* for information. Nevertheless, the failure to recognize this powerful and distinct community in Red River proved to be a costly blunder.

Contributing to the lack of understanding was the prevailing lack of knowledge concerning the Métis in Canada. Aside from the buffalo hunt, which drew general comment from tourists and writers before 1870, little was written on the Métis. Even in the case of the buffalo hunt, writers had consistently failed to follow the implication of such organization through to its logical conclusion. Those who wrote of the North West did not relate, or did not themselves perceive, the powerful sense of identity and ability to work in concert which was a part of the Métis tradition. Rather, when the Métis were mentioned at all, it was in a manner that portrayed them as rather quaint and undisciplined individuals whose habits and character were drawn from their wilderness environment.²¹ It was a composite portrait that served to accentuate their Indian background rather than their French language or Catholic religion. Even among French Canadians, where the identity of religion and language produced some sympathy for the Métis, there was a general belief that these people were a poor semi-nomadic group whose only link to civilization was through the church.²² English Canadians, while they noted the French language and Roman Catholic religion, saw the Métis character as distinct and separate from that of French Canada.

With such characteristics it was generally believed that the future of the Métis within a European framework was, at best, limited. The assumption was that they would only partly adapt to the on-rushing civilization and would thus be relegated to the bottom end of the socio-economic scale. They "will be very useful here when the country gets filled up," Mair noted shortly before the transfer, for they are "easily dealt with and easily controlled."²³ The image of the Métis, and their role for the future, thus resembled that of peasant as much as it did Indian. Strong but manageable, able to cope with European civilization but unlikely to thrive on it, they were expected to passively accept their new lot.

Even such a limited prospect was regarded by expansionists as an improvement on the life which the Métis had led under the rule of the Hudson's Bay Company. For both political and economic reasons Canadians expected to receive the gratitude of these people in the same way they expected the gratitude of all Red River. At the same time, it was hardly to be expected that the Métis, as either peasants or Indians, would be consulted in such a major transaction as the transfer

of the North West. They were at best a "wretched half-starved people" whose comprehension of such matters would be feeble.²⁴ Even in the face of armed resistance, William McDougall could not understand that this image of the Métis was distorted and incomplete. "The Canadian Government," he maintained, had "done nothing to injure these people but everything to benefit them." There was thus no reason for the rebellion, except perhaps that "they — 3 or 4000 semi-savages and serfs of yesterday — will not be trusted with the government and destiny of a third of the American continent."²⁵ With such an image of the Métis and such an underestimation of their sense of identity, it is not surprising that the expansionists were never able to comprehend the real reasons for the decisive resistance in Red River.

The first reaction of expansionists to this seemingly meaningless resistance was one of ridicule and contempt. McDougall initially predicted that the "insurrection will not last a week."²⁶ The *Globe*, on hearing of the activity, scornfully commented on November 17, 1869, that "it is altogether too much of a joke to think of a handful of people barring the way to the onward progress of British institutions and British people on the pretence that the whole wide continent is theirs." As autumn moved into winter, however, and Louis Riel's provisional government gained rather than lost strength, such offhand comments dwindled in number. Gradually expansionists were forced to take the whole issue more seriously.

In attempting to analyze the situation and thereby reach a possible solution, the expansionists were at a disadvantage. Their image of the Métis and their continued belief that the majority of Red River was in favour of annexation made them unable to accept the arguments of the rebels at face value. Only by portraying the Métis as puppets in the hands of artful manipulators, whose real purpose was not being revealed, were they able to find an explanation satisfactory to their own presuppositions. The *Nor'Wester*, in its last issue, maintained that the Métis had been "imposed upon" and led into rebellion.²⁷ McDougall concurred and wrote to Macdonald that "the half-breeds were ignorant and that parties behind were pushing them on."²⁸ The *Globe* referred vaguely but pointedly to "certain persons in their settlement, who are hostile to the Dominion" as the ones who "have made it their business to stir up discontent among the most foolish and ignorant of the population."²⁹ As expansionists, and those who agreed with them, developed this conspiratorial interpretation of the rebellion they began to focus on three individual but inter-related groups as the real instigators of the Métis resistance.

The conspirators who figured most prominently in expansionist thoughts came from south of the border. "It was well known at Fort Garry," McDougall commented in the fall of 1869, "that American

citizens had come into the country." Ostensibly they were traders, but that was merely a mask for their plans to "create disaffection, and if possible, a movement for annexation to the United States." These men and their allies "had been actively engaged in circulating stories, absurd as they were unfounded, to alarm the fears of the half-breeds, and excite their hostility against the Canadian government."³⁰ It was not surprising that American designs on Red River should be seen as a force behind the Métis resistance. Canadian expansionists had long worried about American pretensions to the North West. The *Nor'Wester*, throughout its existence, had urged Canada to act quickly before Red River was forced into "annexation with the United States."³¹ Also, as those interested in the North West were well aware, Canada was not the only home of expansionists. The effective monopoly which the State of Minnesota exerted over trade and transportation with Red River gave its own expansionists some hope that the North West would drift into the American political orbit.

The activities of American expansionists, such as Oscar Malmros, the U.S. Consul in Red River, Enos Stutsman and James Wickes Taylor, gave some reality to the charges of American encouragement of the Red River resistance. What Canadians, and particularly expansionists, failed to realize, however, was that these annexationist forces were auxiliary rather than basic to the Métis resistance.³² The presence of some annexationists in Riel's provisional government and the creation of the *New Nation* gave the American party some influence in Red River in December 1869 and January 1870. Thereafter, however, this influence rapidly declined. Ironically, these Americans were as unable to understand the purpose of the Métis as were Canadian expansionists. The Americans assumed that their dislike of Canada could be transformed into American annexationism, while the Canadians feared that such a goal was all too probable.

The second force which expansionists perceived behind the rebellion was the Hudson's Bay Company. When McDougall met resistance his first reaction, besides perplexed surprise, was to warn William McTavish, Governor of the Council of Assiniboia, that "you are the legal ruler of the country, and responsible for the preservation of the public peace."³³ It was, however, not as simple as that. As McTavish well knew, the Hudson's Bay Company had no force with which to assert its authority. This had been apparent as far back as the Sayer trial, and it would have been both impossible and dangerous for the Company to have attempted to face such a determined group as the Métis. Canadian expansionists, however, had a different explanation. "The Hudson's Bay Company are evidently with the rebels," Schultz wrote in November, 1869. "It is said the rebels will support the Government of the Hudson's Bay Company as it now exists."³⁴ The Member of Parliament for Brant North, J. Y. Bown, passing on

the opinions of his brother, the deposed editor of the *Nor'Wester*, warned Macdonald that before the rebellion "certain parties then in the pay of the Company and holding office under it made threats of what they would do."³⁵ McDougall, perhaps because he was an official representative of Canada, was more circumspect but did point to "the complicity of some of his [Governor McTavish's] council with the insurrection."³⁶ However circumspect McDougall's letter, the message remained the same. The current government of the North West had actively encouraged opposition to the lawful transfer of the territory of Canada.

Though a few individuals in the Company showed some sympathy for the Métis, the expansionists had little evidence to support their charges. The expansionists had proclaimed for so long that the Company exerted an oppressive tyranny over the people of Red River that they could not now accept the fact that it was powerless. Those more detached from the expansionist perspective tended to have a more realistic analysis. John A. Macdonald sharply disagreed with McDougall's condemnation of McTavish, and at no time did the Canadian government accept the theory that there was any Hudson's Bay involvement in the rebellion.³⁷

The third conspiratorial force perceived behind the rebellion was to prove the most dangerous in its implications for Canada. The Roman Catholic church, or at least its representatives in Red River, were also accused of aiding the Métis in their resistance. "The worst feature in this case," McDougall told Macdonald, "is the apparent complicity of the priests." Rather than support constituted authority they had openly supported rebellion. "It appears certain that at least one of them has openly preached sedition to his flock and has furnished aid and comfort to the parties in arms."³⁸ On December 9, 1869 the *Toronto Globe* singled out Father J. N. Richtot as the "head and front of the whole movement by the French half-breeds." The Catholic clergy joined the rapidly swelling ranks of those who were seen as the instigators of rebellion, having "worked upon the ignorance and fears of the French speaking portion of the people to such an extent as to lead them to armed resistance."³⁹

Expansionist perceptions of the relationship between the Métis and the clergy made it natural for them to suspect the priests. The Métis were viewed as a superstitious and ignorant people and, as every good Ontario Protestant knew, the Roman Catholic church exercised totalitarian control over its membership. It followed that had the clergy wished to stop the rebellion they could have. Further, no individual priest would dare work in opposition to his own church hierarchy. Thus the ultimate conclusion had to be, as the *Globe* decided in the spring of 1870, "that Bishop Taché holds the whole threads of the affair in his hand."⁴⁰ At any time he could have commanded

the Métis to cease resistance, but he consistently refrained from doing so. This was the best proof of all that the church was in league with the rebels. "A word from their Bishop," McDougall charged, "would have sent them all to their homes and re-established the lawful Government of Assiniboia, but that word was not spoken."⁴¹

These accusations against the clergy were an almost instinctive reaction to a body which was viewed with extreme suspicion. The expansionist movement and its nationalist allies consisted largely of English-speaking Protestants. French-Canadian Roman Catholics had played little part in the effort to acquire the North West and thus had no spokesmen within the ranks of the movement. Moreover, many expansionist leaders, such as William McDougall, had long viewed the Catholic church as some sort of hostile foe conspiring against Canada. The religious and political controversies of Canadian history had paved the way for the expansionist reaction to the clergy in 1869. Many English Canadians were all too ready to implicate the Catholic church in any activity directed against the Canadian nation or British Empire.

Such conspiratorial explanations enabled the expansionists and nationalists to reconcile the rebellion with their belief that the population of Red River favoured entry into Canada. The rebellion was not a popular uprising at all. The majority of the people opposed the resistance, but as Mair theorized "the Yankee, the Company and the Priests had a fair field; whilst the loyal English natives, comprising about two thirds of the population, without arms and ammunition, cursed their own helplessness and shrunk from the guns at Fort Garry."⁴² The rebellion was the fault neither of Canada nor of the Canadian expansionists, and was not supported by the people of Red River. Foreign elements had manipulated an ignorant segment of the populace in order to gain their own nefarious ends.

The analysis of the rebellion had obvious implications for the policy to be pursued in bringing it to an end. For John A. Macdonald, who saw expansionist arrogance and Métis suspicions behind the outbreak, the best solution seemed to be "to behave in as patient and conciliatory a fashion as possible."⁴³ The rebellion was essentially a movement aiming at political guarantees; to Macdonald, that implied a political solution. Compromise with the Métis would allay their fears and allow the peaceful acquisition of the territory before American expansionists could exploit the situation. He even suggested bringing Riel into the police force which was planned for the region as "a most convincing proof that you are not going to leave the half-breeds out of the law."⁴⁴

In contrast to Macdonald, those who saw the rebellion as a conspiracy felt it dangerous to assume that the matter could be resolved by conciliation. They perceived the ultimate goal of the rebellion to

be the disruption of Canada and perhaps the whole British Empire. Attempts to reconcile the Métis were pointless, for they were not at the base of the rebellion. The problem went much deeper and had much more important consequences. Given these beliefs, the expansionists thus felt that the only possible response to continued rebellion was the use of force. Moreover, as the *Globe* concluded, the rebellion was not a popular uprising, and the use of troops would thus not put Canada "in the unpleasant position of oppressors forcing an unpopular government upon a protesting people." Military action would simply ensure the wishes of the majority of people of Red River were carried out while, at the same time, stopping those who "for merely selfish purposes" sought to overthrow "British authority and British freedom."⁴⁵ At a meeting of some five thousand citizens in April, 1870, the mayor of Toronto warned that the British Empire might employ troops to "put down that miserable creature . . . who attempts to usurp authority at Fort Garry."⁴⁶ As the months went by, the rhetoric of expansionism indicated a growing willingness, even enthusiasm, for the use of military force.

The official government approach remained much more conciliatory. Further, many government officials blamed leading expansionists, especially William McDougall, Charles Mair and John Schultz, for their provocative actions.⁴⁷ The expansionists replied with their own increasingly harsh criticisms. Macdonald was blamed for his abandonment of McDougall and his refusal to accept the transfer of the territory from Britain until peace was restored.⁴⁸ Joseph Howe, the Nova Scotian cabinet minister and former anti-confederationist, was suspected of secretly encouraging the rebellion during his visit to the settlement shortly before it began.⁴⁹ In this climate of bitterness and mutual recrimination, expansionists began to feel increasingly estranged from the government and to perceive themselves as an unjustly vilified minority within the nation. It seemed that only Ontario had enough national patriotism to create a forceful demand for the suppression of the rebellion. Other parts of the Dominion and the government itself delayed and hesitated while Canada's future remained in danger.

The charges that began to circulate in the spring of 1870 gave this sense of bitterness more concrete form. In the wake of the execution of Thomas Scott by Riel, the Canadian government reluctantly decided that a military expedition to the North West was necessary. From the expansionist perspective such an expedition was of the utmost importance. They had called for a show of force from the beginning, and Scott's death added a new emotionalism to these demands. Scott had been martyred for his loyalty and "humble though his position was — yet he was a Canadian; his mental gifts may have been few — yet he died for us."⁵⁰ As preparations were undertaken

for the expedition, however, many individuals began to suspect that there was an element in the government working to hamper it. Singled out were prominent French-Canadian politicians, including George Cartier, Minister of Militia. Those who supported the use of force saw in Cartier and his allies a "party which opposed in every possible manner the departure of the expedition."⁵¹

Complicating matters was an increasing public opposition in French Canada to the use of such force. As attitudes in Ontario grew increasingly militant in the wake of Scott's death, many French Canadians became wary of the motivation which lay behind such vehemence. Naturally sensitive to the intolerance often exhibited by English-Canadian Protestantism, they had little difficulty in accepting the Métis rationale for the rebellion at face value. The Métis were, with good reason, simply seeking guarantees that their religious and linguistic rights would be protected under the new order. A military expedition seemed both unnecessary and oppressive, and many French Canadians protested against the decision to send one.

To the expansionists and to a good many other English Canadians, however, such a position was treasonable. More and more, the wrath of Ontario public opinion turned its attention from Fenians and foreign agents to those within Canada who would oppose their militant brand of expansion. French-Canadian opposition to the expedition, the *Globe* warned, contained within it an ominous principle:

If British troops cannot go on British territory wherever the authorities desire to send them without being denounced as butchers and filibusterers by fellow subjects, things must be in a poor way. If that can't be done in Red River, it can't in Quebec, and if the latter doctrine is held, by all means let it be advanced, but it is just as well to have it understood that a good many pounds will be spent, and a good many lives lost before it will be acquiesced in.⁵²

Expansionists believed that Howe and others, for personal reasons, might have worked to thwart the interests of Canada. In the growing hostility of French Canada, however, they perceived a movement of much larger proportions and much greater significance.

The racial and religious implications of the Red River rebellion had never been far below the surface. The priests, accused of participation in the insurrection, had brought the issue of the Catholic religion into the question from the beginning. The Métis had often been rather loosely referred to as the "French party" and that term, in turn, used as a description of the rebellious elements in the settlement.⁵³ On the other hand, expansionists had tried to play down the popular support for the rebellion by portraying the rebels as a small segment of even the French half-breeds. John Schultz, for instance, made a point at the public rally in Toronto of distinguishing between the rebels and

the loyal French half-breed elements in Red River.⁵⁴ Also, William McDougall had initially seen the clerical involvement in the rebellion as a result of the fact that most of them were foreign born.⁵⁵ Thus, if religious and racial undertones were present throughout the rebellion, they were muted.

The debate over the military expedition brought these undertones to the surface. The process was a dialectic one. French Canada objected to Ontario demands for the use of force against a people which it felt was, whether in a correct manner or not, simply trying to protect itself. Ontario expansionists, seeing the complaints of the Métis as a subterfuge for more malignant ends, took the French-Canadian opposition to the expedition as a sign of disloyalty. The muted racial friction increased until it became a dominant ingredient of Canadian politics.

By July, 1870, it was being argued not only that French Canada opposed the expedition but that, unless loyalists acted quickly, the force would never reach Red River. Canada First members George Denison and R. G. Haliburton saw a devious plot on the part of Cartier and his cohorts to give Riel an amnesty and recall the force before it reached Red River. Warning was given by these "loyalists" that any such attempt would meet massive resistance from Toronto and that Cartier and Taché, scheduled to arrive in Toronto, would be confronted by hostile crowds. Shortly afterwards another huge rally was called, and there the honour of the Empire and the suppression of rebellion were again demanded.⁵⁶ Once again the cry of treason had been raised but in this case the traitors were identified as French-Canadian cabinet members rather than the rebels themselves.

The slightly ludicrous hysterics of Denison and Haliburton indicate the change which had taken place in the analysis of the rebellion by the summer of 1870. Between March, when news of Scott's death first created widespread support for the use of force, and July the focus in the conspiratorial analysis of the rebellion shifted. Fenians and Hudson's Bay Company officials remained involved but it was the role of the priests that was assuming the greatest significance. Their role in the rebellion became much clearer once it was believed that French Canada was also involved. The two forces, linked through their common language and religion, were in league. Their joint goal was, as McDougall warned his constituents after his return to Canada, to have "the North-West made into a French Catholic Colony, with special restrictions on all their inhabitants."⁵⁷ The *Toronto Globe*, replying angrily to criticism of Ontario's militancy in the Quebec press, charged that "the fanatics are the French Canadians, who are striving to obtain for themselves peculiar and exclusive privileges."⁵⁸

In a complex psychological process brought on by French-Canadian opposition to Ontario militancy, the conspiratorial figures of Red

River were transferred from the North West to Canada. It was the story of the established church, clergy reserves and anti-democratic privileges for the minority all over again. French Canada had allied itself with the priests of Red River in order to prevent the natural development of British civilization and to preserve autocratic rule. And the expansionists argued that rule by the Catholic church, as surely as by the Hudson's Bay Company, would "lock up the splendid country under a more odious tyranny than that which has long ruled it."⁵⁹ French Canada had come to be considered as much of a danger as the Hudson's Bay Company to the sort of Protestant commercial culture which the expansionists envisaged for the North West.

The expansionists' fears concerning the West were reinforced by the government's proposed Manitoba Act, first introduced to Parliament on May 2, 1870. The boundaries of the new province, the educational system and those clauses which set aside land for the Métis were seen as further evidence of a conspiracy to create a French Catholic province in the North West. The Act prompted McDougall to bring his view of the rebellion to the floor of the House of Commons. Over shouts of opposition he charged that "the rebellion in the North West originated with the Roman Catholic priesthood" and that "the priesthood desired to secure certain advantages for themselves, their Church or their people."⁶⁰ Captain G. L. Huyshe, a member of the Red River expedition, envisaged dire consequences were the Act to succeed and warned that if any land were given to the Métis "it is probable that a large portion of it will eventually fall into the hands of the Roman Catholic church." It would thus gain "an undue preponderance of wealth and power" in Manitoba.⁶¹ To many the overall implications of the Manitoba Act were clear enough. Its designs threatened by Wolseley's advancing troops, French Canada had attempted one final time to gain what it had sought from the beginning. The Manitoba Act was nothing more than "a Bill to establish a French half-breed and foreign ecclesiastical supremacy in Manitoba."⁶²

Two implications flowed from the shift of attention from conspiracies in Red River to those in Ottawa and Quebec. First, the French Catholic nature of the Métis was emphasized. Previously, as has been argued, the Métis tie to the wilderness was seen as the dominant factor in shaping their character. During the controversy surrounding the rebellion, however, this changed. As agents, whether wittingly or unwittingly, of French Canada and the Catholic church, the Métis' connection with French Canada began to be stressed. This shift was apparent in both French and English Canada. The continual references in the Ontario press to the "French party" had led French Canadians to identify with the Métis to an extent unknown before the resistance.⁶³ The year 1870 was only the beginning of a period which would see French Canadians increasingly associate the cause

of the Métis and their leader, Louis Riel, with the rights of French Canadians.

The second implication for the expansionists was that only Ontario possessed the true spirit of Canadian nationalism. After all, they argued, only in Ontario had there been strong support for annexation of the North West and forceful suppression of the rebellion. If necessary, that province would have to abrogate to itself the development of the North West in the name of Canada, in the same way that Canada had claimed it in the name of the Empire. It was Ontario, as Schultz pointed out, from which "this movement to add Red River to the Dominion commenced; it was in Ontario this expression of indignation was expressed." It was therefore, he concluded, "to Ontario the Territory properly belonged."⁶⁴ The rebellion made explicit what had been implicit all along—the regional nature of Canadian expansionism.

While the arrival of the expeditionary force in Red River in August, 1870, ended the actual rebellion, its legacy was to be felt for many years to come. The soldiers of that force and those immigrants who followed them brought to Manitoba a set of suspicions which continually threatened to destroy the racial and religious balance which the Canadian government had recognized in Manitoba.⁶⁵ Contributing to this tension was the tendency of the Canadian volunteers stationed in Winnipeg to assume the right to mete out justice to those associated with the rebellion. The tragic climax of such vigilante action occurred when a former supporter of Riel drowned in the Red while attempting to flee pursuing militiamen. Thereafter violence declined, but there were sporadic outbreaks as religious and racial frictions prompted individuals to refight the rebellion of 1870.

Such individual violence was only a symptom of a general suspicion that French-Canadian attempts to turn Manitoba into a Catholic province had not ended with the collapse of the rebellion. Expansionists and nationalists continued to watch for signs of government or individual activity against English Canadians in Manitoba. Typical was Denison's warning to Schultz that the Ontario troops would be sent back east on some pretext rather than be allowed to disband in Manitoba and thus contribute to the permanent English population there.⁶⁶ Haliburton, not to be outdone, wrote Macdonald angrily when he heard that a French Canadian was to be appointed to the bench in Manitoba. Such an appointment, he argued, would simply aid Quebec in its attempts "at making Manitoba a New Quebec with French laws."⁶⁷ Suspicions of racial bias in Manitoba, distrust of the federal government and the question of amnesty for Riel perpetuated and deepened the attitude created by the rebellion itself. In the process eastern politics and prejudice were not only taken West but found there an ultimate test of the strength of the various factions:

Manitoba has been to us on a small scale what Kansas was to the United States. It has been the battle-ground for our British and French elements with their respective religions, as Kansas was the battleground for Free Labour and Slavery. Ontario has played a part in the contests there analogous to New England, Quebec to that of the southern States.⁶⁸

While the specific analogy may have been inappropriate, the comment was a perceptive one for it revealed how the resistance had been transformed by expansionist perceptions of it. The argument has been made that "the most persistent social theme of the Prairies has been the struggle for cultural dominance."⁶⁹ If so, then the events surrounding 1870 mark a decisive stage in the development of that theme. Expansionists saw in the resistance and its aftermath a contest between French and English in Canada for a dominant position in the West. Moreover, the events of the rebellion had proven to their satisfaction that French Canada had been willing to sacrifice or distort the development of the region for its own ends. It was thus impossible, expansionists believed, to entrust a heritage as important as the West to such a group. Not only was it necessary to have an eastern agricultural order dominant in Manitoba, but it also had to be English and Protestant. And as Kansas became a testing ground for dominance in the American West, so Manitoba became one for the Canadians. "Prairie culture," it has been noted, "developed from a Manitoba base."⁷⁰ Expansionists seem to have sensed this would be the case and they were thus determined to assert their dominance there in order to ensure their influence over the rest of the Prairies.

The racial strife which marked Manitoba's entry into Canada gradually subsided. The settlement of the question of amnesty for Riel, whether satisfactory or not, removed this contentious issue from the daily papers. In the same period legal and political institutions were firmly established under the governorship of Adams Archibald and his successor, Alexander Morris. Most importantly, the continuing inflow of population from Ontario gave assurance to English Canada that its culture would dominate in the new province and thus eased fears of a French-Canadian plot.⁷¹ It was perhaps symbolic of the triumph of the Canada Party in old Red River that as early as 1872 Morris recommended that John Schultz, implacable enemy of the Métis, should be appointed a member of the North West Council.⁷² The Manitoba "base" was, within a few years of 1870, increasingly English Canadian and Protestant.

The triumph of one order meant the collapse of the other. While the Province of Manitoba was able to incorporate many elements of old Red River into its social order, the French half-breed was not one of them. In increasing numbers the Métis sought refuge from the civilization of Red River and the intolerance of its new inhabitants. Moving to the still empty banks of the North Saskatchewan they

remained separate representatives of the old order and of a French Catholic tradition. Their respite was to be temporary, however, for the agricultural frontier continued to spread westward and would soon threaten their distinct existence once again. Nor did either side seem to learn much from the experience of 1870. Alexander Morris's warning to Macdonald in 1873 that "the Saskatchewan will require prompt attention, or we will have the same game over again there" went unheeded in the same way as had the warnings of the 1860s.⁷³

NOTES

- ¹ G. F. G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada* (Toronto, 1961), 44–143; W. L. Morton, *Manitoba, A History* (Toronto, 1957), 109–120, and *The Critical Years* (Toronto, 1968), 235–244; A. C. Gluek, *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest* (Toronto, 1965), 254–261; Pierre Berton, *The National Dream* (Toronto, 1970), 29–30.
- ² Morton, *The Critical Years*, 237; Mason Wade, *The French Canadians*, Vol. 1 (Toronto, 1968), 402.
- ³ Arthur Silver, "French Quebec and the Métis Question, 1869–1885," in Carl Berger & Ramsay Cook, eds., *The West and the Nation* (Toronto, 1976), 91–113, 92.
- ⁴ For a more complete description of the nature of Canadian expansionism and the personnel behind it see D. R. Owram, "The Great North West: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Image of the West in the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1976). For convenience the term expansionist will be used henceforth to describe members of the Canada Party, Canada First movement and individuals like Brown and McDougall who strongly opposed the rebellion.
- ⁵ A. K. Isbister, *A Few Words on the Hudson's Bay Company* (London, 1847). For an account of Isbister's efforts see E. E. Rich, *The Hudson's Bay Company, 1670–1870*, Vol. 3 (Toronto, 1960), 545–547.
- ⁶ See, for instance, *Toronto Globe*, December 13, 1856; *Montreal Gazette*, June 6, 1857.
- ⁷ *Toronto Globe*, March 5, 1857. Letter from Isbister.
- ⁸ Great Britain. Parliament. *Select Committee on the Hudson's Bay Territories*, Appendix 15 (London, 1857), 439.
- ⁹ *British Parliamentary Papers*. Colonies. Canada. Vol. 27, 485. "Resolution Adopted at a Public Meeting of the Inhabitants of the Red River Settlement," dated January 17, 1867.
- ¹⁰ *Nor'Wester*, January 12, 1869.
- ¹¹ Alexander Begg, *Dot-It-Down* (Toronto, 1871) portrays the *Nor'Wester* as the voice of a few self-interested men.
- ¹² *Nor'Wester*, November 28, 1864.
- ¹³ Public Archives of Manitoba (P.A.M.), Schultz Papers, Box 16, Mair to Schultz, May 14, 1866; B. Chewitt and Co., to Schultz, December 30, 1867 (for a subscription for S. J. Dawson).
- ¹⁴ *Nor'Wester*, March 5, 1862.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, September 22, 1865; December 1, 1866; July 13, 1867; August 4, 1868.
- ¹⁶ Sandford Fleming, *Memorial of the People of Red River to the British and Canadian Governments* (Quebec, 1863).
- ¹⁷ *Nor'Wester*, January 24, 1863.
- ¹⁸ Alexander Begg, *Dot-It-Down*, 107.
- ¹⁹ *Nor'Wester*, December 14, 1862.
- ²⁰ *Toronto Globe*, May 28, 1869. Letter from Mair.
- ²¹ Paul Kane, *Wanderings of an Artist among the Indians of North America* (London, 1859), 51; Province of Canada. *Sessional Papers* (1859), Number 36; Daniel Wilson, "Displacement and Extinction Among the Primeval Races of Man," *Canadian Journal* (January, 1856), 12.
- ²² A. I. Silver, *French-Canadian Attitudes Towards the North-West and North-West Settlement 1870–1890* (unpublished M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1966), 106.
- ²³ *Toronto Globe*, December 4, 1868; February 16, 1869. Letters from Mair.
- ²⁴ Queen's University Library, Mair Papers, Denison to Mair, March 29, 1869.
- ²⁵ Public Archives of Canada (P.A.C.), Macdonald Papers, Vol. 102, McDougall to Macdonald, November 13, 1869.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, McDougall to Macdonald, October 31, 1869.
- ²⁷ *Nor'Wester*, November 23, 1869.
- ²⁸ P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, Vol. 102, McDougall to Macdonald, October 31, 1869.
- ²⁹ *Toronto Globe*, November 13, 1869.
- ³⁰ Dominion of Canada, *Sessional Papers* (1870), Number 12, McDougall to Howe, November 5, 1869.
- ³¹ *Nor'Wester*, February 5, 1862. See also, July 28, 1860; September 28, 1860; May 28, 1862; July 13, 1867; January 12, 1869.

- 32 Gluek, *Minnesota and the Manifest Destiny of the Canadian Northwest*, 263–294, discusses American aims in Red River and the impact of these aims on the resistance.
- 33 P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, Vol. 102, McDougall to McTavish, November 2, 1869.
- 34 Dominion of Canada, *Sessional Papers* (1870), Number 12, Schultz to McDougall, November, 1869; see also Mair to McDougall, November 8, 1869.
- 35 P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, Vol. 102, J. Bown to Macdonald, November 26, 1869.
- 36 Dominion of Canada, *Sessional Papers* (1870), Number 12, McDougall to Joseph Howe, November 13, 1869.
- 37 P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, Vol. 516, Macdonald to McDougall, December 8, 1869.
- 38 *Ibid.*, Vol. 102, McDougall to Macdonald, October 31, 1869.
- 39 *Toronto Globe*, January 4, 1870.
- 40 *Ibid.*, April 15, 1870.
- 41 William McDougall, *The Red River Rebellion: Eight Letters to the Hon. Joseph Howe* (Toronto, 1870), 44.
- 42 G. T. Denison, *Reminiscences of the Red River Rebellion*. "Letter by Charles Mair," (Toronto, 1873), 6.
- 43 D. G. Creighton, *John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain* (Toronto, 1955), 47.
- 44 P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, Vol. 516, Macdonald to McDougall, November 20, 1869.
- 45 *Toronto Globe*, January 24, 1870.
- 46 *Ibid.*, April 7, 1870.
- 47 P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, Vol. 516, Macdonald to McDougall, December 8, 1869.
- 48 *Toronto Globe*, December 31, 1869.
- 49 *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 3rd Session, February 21, 1870, 111–116. Also, McDougall, *Red River Rebellion*, 5–6.
- 50 W. A. Foster, *Canada First, or, Our New Nationality* (Toronto, 1871), 33.
- 51 G. L. Huyshe, *The Red River Expedition* (London, 1871), 23.
- 52 *Toronto Globe*, May 2, 1870.
- 53 Dominion of Canada, *Sessional Papers* (1870), Number 12, "Proclamation by J. S. Dennis, December 9, 1869," 101.
- 54 *Toronto Globe*, April 7, 1870.
- 55 P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, Vol. 102, McDougall to Macdonald, October 31, 1869.
- 56 Norman Shrive, *Charles Mair Literary Nationalist* (Toronto, 1965), 112–115.
- 57 *Carleton Place Herald*, February 9, 1870.
- 58 *Toronto Globe*, April 14, 1870.
- 59 *Carleton Place Herald*, February 9, 1870. Speech by McDougall.
- 60 *Debates*, 1st Parliament, 3rd Session, May 2, 1870, 1302.
- 61 Huyshe, *The Red River Expedition*, 212. See also *Globe*, April 23, 1870.
- 62 McDougall, *The Red River Rebellion*, 46.
- 63 Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada*, 157.
- 64 *Toronto Globe*, April 7, 1870.
- 65 W. L. Morton, *Manitoba*, 146–150.
- 66 P.A.M., Schultz Papers, Box 16, Denison to Schultz, January 28, 1871.
- 67 P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, Vol. 342, Haliburton to Macdonald, October 7, 1870. See also, *Ibid.*, Haliburton to Macdonald, October 6, 1870 and R. G. Haliburton, "The Queen and a United Empire," *St. James Magazine and United Empire Review*, January, 1874.
- 68 "Current Events," *Canadian Monthly and National Review*, September, 1874, 250.
- 69 J. E. Rea, "The Roots of Prairie Society," David Gagan, ed., *Prairie Perspectives* (Toronto, 1970), 46–55, 46.
- 70 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 71 W. L. Morton, *Manitoba*, 159.
- 72 P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, Vol. 252, Morris to Macdonald, October 1, 1872.
- 73 *Ibid.*, Morris to Macdonald, January 25, 1873.