Reconciliation and the Historical Memory of Canada's Louis Riel

David Doyle (M. Ed)

Abstract: There is no figure in Canadian history more controversial than the nineteenth century Métis leader Louis Riel – the Prophet of the New World. This controversy goes back to the formation of Canada in 1867 and the "secret" Canadian purchase of the Hudson's Bay Company's "Royal Charter" to the Great Northwest (Rupert's Land) and continues into the present.

As Canada prepares for its Sesquicentennial (150 years) despite the Canadian Commons, Senate and Manitoba all recognizing Louis Riel's role in Confederation in the twentieth century, Louis Riel remains convicted of the most heinous of crimes: High Treason—branded a "traitor" to Canada—an ominous warning to those who might follow Louis Riel's career. Moving beyond the narrow perspectives of the colonial past my investigations over the past thirty years lead to different conclusions: Riel was legitimately seeking Aboriginal and democratic rights for the peoples of the Great Northwest: Métis, First Nation and "Settler" and was wrongfully tried, convicted and executed. For Canadian reconciliation to be meaningful the exoneration of Louis Riel is required.
2017 is Canada's Sesquicentennial – 150 years since the initial confederation of four British colonies. The legacy of 150 years is the Canada of today. In this twenty-first century, in the spirit of reconciliation and honouring, a long overdue healing must take place. A vital piece of our Canadian history remains undone—an injustice within the Canadian Confederation must be corrected. Before the celebration of Canada's sesquicentennial (2017) can truly be meaningful the good name and reputation of Louis Riel, Canada's martyred Northwest leader, le Pere of the Indigenous Métis nation, founder of Manitoba and a father of the Canadian Confederation must be restored.

**LOUIS RIEL REMAINS BRANDED A "TRAITOR"**

With the establishment of the Dominion of Canada this new "confederation" aggressively expanded across the northern North American continent. It was Canada's expansion into the Northwest without consulting the citizens of that region that lead to the Red River Insurrection of 1869-70 led by Louis Riel.

By the 1880s the people living in the Northwest Territories had once again become increasingly concerned about the lack of respect by the Government of Canada for their rights. In 1884 they called on Louis Riel to return to Canada to assist them in negotiating once more with the Government of Canada in respect of their land claims and the very survival of the Métis people. All of the petitions sent by the Métis to the Government of Canada requesting a redress of the people's grievances and the recognition of their rights were ignored. The Government of Canada responded by sending troops against the Métis at Batoche where the Métis, under the leadership of Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont defended their lives, families and homes. Various First Nations joined the Métis in the defense of their rights and territories. Subsequently, Louis Riel was wrongfully tried and convicted. On November 16, 1885, Louis Riel was executed for high treason by the Government of Canada.

**LOUIS RIEL IN CANADIAN HISTORY**

Throughout the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century Louis Riel was characterized as an "ogre" a "villain" and a "traitor" in official Canadian history. I need not remind you that in this 21st century the dinosaurs are still attempting to portray Louis Riel as a traitor, murder and madman. One such attempt back in 2010 was a pamphlet put out by Peter Goldring, a Conservative M.P. from Edmonton, Alberta, called the *Truth About Louis Riel* in which he makes a host of claims condemning Louis Riel. This M.P.'s use of his parliamentary newsletter to denounce Riel was quickly turned on its head when Métis historians George and Terry Goulet methodically cut through the M.P.'s assertions that Riel's trial was fair and that Riel was hanged for his crimes of "murder and high treason." Riel wasn't a murderer and the capital crime of "High Treason" was bogus, based upon a fourteenth century English law imported into the Northwest Territories—but not Canada.
The Goulet's also submitted parliamentary evidence (Reference: Hansard 1886, p. 122) that John A. Macdonald submitted “cooked-up documents” to his Cabinet to ensure Louis Riel would hang. With the general outrage at Goldring’s blatant nineteenth century politics Prime Minister Stephen Harper was forced to distance his government from such outright bigotry.

There was also the vile article published in the *Legion Magazine* this past year reviving the old claim that Riel was "mad." Written by an old colonial historian it was thoroughly refuted by BC Métis. As a result the *Legion Magazine* put restitution in place recognizing Métis Veterans and publishing the Goulet's beautiful article on Louis Riel and his role in Canadian history and politics in the next issue of the *Legion Magazine*.

**LOUIS RIEL INTERNATIONALLY**

Over the past five years I have had the opportunity to introduce Louis Riel to audiences internationally. This includes peoples from the Latin American countries, but also Asia and Africa and the United States. They invariably comment on the similarity between Louis Riel and their revolutionary heroes in their struggles against colonialism. This became particularly evident to me in my travels to Cuba where José Martí, a contemporary of Riel, is recognized as a national hero and the father of the Cuban War of Independence.

José Martí is deeply loved not only in Cuba but across Latin America, and much of the world. He is seen as a significant literary figure of the stature of Dickens or Shakespeare. He is also seen as the father of independence, a man who spent his life in the struggle against Spanish colonialism and United States domination of Latin America. A poet and a martyr he gave his life in the armed struggle to create an independent Cuba as Riel gave his for the Métis.

I also have some very exciting news in regard to Louis Riel's reputation internationally. We now have evidence of Louis Riel being recognized as one of the "Liberators" in the second-wave of the international anti-colonial struggles in the New World. Just months after Riel’s conviction and execution for treason in 1885, a poet in Brazil by the name of Mathias Carvalho’s* wrote a three-part monograph, *Poemes Americanus 1: Louis Riel* revolving around Louis Riel:

Riel appeared from their midst  
With the bright clarity of a whirlwind,  
The air of the free entered his breast,  
He felt red courage in his blood...

* *Religion, Writing and Colonial Resistance { Mathias Carvalho's Louis Riel }*:

Jennifer Reid
Moving beyond the narrow perspectives of the past, where Riel and the struggles of the Métis were seen as a "primitive response to the onset of civilization" or "English vs. French" or "West vs. East" it can now be argued that Riel's struggles were part of a pan-hemispheric response to nineteenth century colonialism and imperialism that was not only political, social, and economic but also fundamentally religious. He sought democratic and Aboriginal rights and fathered the province of Manitoba.

Although in March of 1992 the House of Commons and the Senate of Canada unanimously adopted resolutions recognizing the various and significant contributions of Louis Riel to Canada and to the Métis people and, in particular, recognized his unique and historic role as a founder of Manitoba—the so-called "debate" continues.

In May of 1992 the legislative Assembly of Manitoba passed a resolution unanimously recognizing "the unique and historic role of Louis Riel as a founder of Manitoba and his contribution in the development of the Canadian Confederation." In 1997 the Liberal Government in its Gathering Strength Aboriginal Initiative promised to look into "Louis Riel's proper place in Canadian History." This initiative faded away with the wind.

Although the Conservative prime minister apologized for the abuse of First Nations children at government and church run residential schools in 2008, and finally recognized the United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2010 there has been no move to recognize Louis Riel's proper place in Canadian history. In fact the Supreme Court ruled that after one-hundred and forty years the federal government has failed to fulfill its obligations to Canada's Métis people regarding land grants promised in the Manitoba Act of 1870. The government is also appealing the court's recognition of the Métis as Indians under the Constitution Act of 1867 in the "Daniel's Decision." It is to be noted as well that the late Métis leader Harry Daniels and others sought a ruling on the Crown's "fiduciary duty" to Métis and non-status Indians, asking the court to agree that Métis and non-status Indians "have the right to be consulted and negotiated with, in good faith, by the federal government on a collective basis through representatives of their choice, respecting all their rights, interests and needs as Aboriginal peoples." This the court denied. The ruling did however state that fiduciary responsibility will flow automatically now that the status of the groups in question has been clarified. This too the government rejected.

**EXONERATION**

As a Canadian my goal is to see Louis Riel exonerated, deemed innocent of the charge of high treason. That means the Parliament of Canada recognizes the legitimacy of his resistance and the stain of "traitor" is removed from the good name of Louis Riel. Secondly in the interest of reconciliation I wish to see Louis Riel recognized as Canada's Aboriginal Father of Confederation. As well I wish to see November 16 recognized as
Louis Riel Day across Canada (except Manitoba that celebrates Louis Riel Day in February) and a statue of Riel placed prominently on Parliament Hill.

There have been numerous unsuccessful attempts, Private Member's Bills, to have Riel "pardoned" by the Canadian Parliament. There is even more opposition to seeing Louis Riel "exonerated." This question has become a "hot potato" in that there are those who do not wish to see Riel "legitimized" for a variety of reasons. There are Métis organizations dependent on government finances who do not wish to jeopardize Conservative financial support, there are also Métis nationalist who do not recognize Canada and declare Riel Métis, but not Canadian. There are also those forces that see Riel's exoneration as political expediency, getting the federal government "off the hook." Also there remain those who maintain long-term prejudices and still see Riel and the Métis as a threat to "their" Canada First. One of the key issues in the struggle for exoneration is the great deal of confusion mongering as to the difference between a "Pardon" and "Exoneration." Pardon assumes guilt. Exoneration is the action of officially absolving someone from blame – recognizing their innocence.

Although Canada's Prime Minister (2009) considers that "Canada also has no history of colonialism" these illegal acts against Louis Riel and the Métis people are Canada's legacy of colonialism. As Canadians we bear the awesome responsibility to review and re-develop our history – starting with Louis Riel. Consistent with history and justice the conviction of Louis Riel for high treason need be reversed and his historic role formally recognized and commemorated.

**JUSTICE AND MERCY DENIED**

*A Commission of Enquiry into the Career of Louis Riel*

My wish is this, your Honor, that a commission be appointed by the proper authorities, but amongst the proper authorities of course I count on English authorities, that is the first proper authorities, that a commission be appointed, that commission examine into this question, or if they are appointed to try me, if a special tribunal is appointed, that I am tried first on these questions:

1. Has Riel rebelled in 1869?
2. Was Riel a murderer of Thomas Scott, when Thomas Scott was executed?
3. When Riel received the money from Archbishop Taché, reported to be the money of Sir John (A. Macdonald), was it corruption money?
4. When Riel seized, with the Council of Red River, on the property of the Hudson's Bay Company, did he commit pillage?
5. When Riel was expelled from the House (of Commons) as a fugitive of justice in 1874, was he a fugitive of justice?
6. Whether Riel rebelled on the Saskatchewan in 1885?

I WISH MY CAREER SHOULD BE TRIED, NOT THE LAST PART OF IT!
Justice and Mercy
Regina, North-West Territories, August 1, 1885.
Louis Riel, in his only allowed defence, called for the establishment of

A Commission of Enquiry into the Career of Louis Riel

Found guilty of high treason on August 1, 1885 Louis Riel decried his trial in a lowly territorial court in a dusty tar-paper shack-town, Regina, with lawyers whose defence was his "insanity", six Anglo-jurors and a judge who was a political advisor to the Lieutenant Governor and under the sway of a Quebec judge sent to ensure conviction. Under these circumstances Riel pleaded for a:

Commission of Enquiry into the Career of Louis Riel

NO SUCH COMMISSION HAS YET TO BE CALLED

Mr. Prime Minister convene a Commission of Inquiry in 2015