IN HIS OWN WORDS: ABBÉ NOËL RITCHOT AND THE CAUSES OF THE RED RIVER RESISTANCE

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In discussions of the origins of the Red River Resistance, the difficulty of retracing the first-hand perspective of those who opposed Canada's attempt to assume authority over the North-West is often evoked. The papers of Joseph-Noël Ritchot, Parish Priest of St. Norbert from 1862 to 1905, are a notable exception. Born in l'Assomption Lower Canada, in 1825, Ritchot had come west in 1862 at the invitation of Bishop Taché and was soon appointed as *curé* of the Métis Parish of St. Norbert at the southern end of the Red River Settlement. Unlike many of his peers, Catholic and Protestant, he had a great deal of respect and admiration for the Métis, by whom he was equally well regarded in his lifetime and beyond.

As an early leader, and as the Red River's lead negotiator facing off against Prime Minister John A. Macdonald and Minister of Militia and Defence, George-Étienne Cartier, Ritchot played a pivotal role in the creation of Manitoba. Historian George F. Stanley's use of Ritchot's notes and "Ottawa Journal" in his *Louis Riel* (first published in 1963) made that biography the first to shed some light on the role played by Ritchot in the Red River Resistance. Stanley made clear that Ritchot was not simply a religious advisor.

> *It was Ritchot, more than any other person who was watching events and guiding the thoughts of the people to whom he ministered in his parish at St. Norbert* (Stanley, 1972, pp. 56-57).

A fuller examination of Ritchot's papers, some of which were believed destroyed in a fire, permitted the present author to produce his own more



Unknown Photographer, Abbé Noël Joseph Ritchot, ca.1870. Image Courtesy of Collection générale de la Société historique de Saint-Boniface.

expansive study of the cleric's role (Mailhot 1986). With the exception of his testimony before the Select Committee on the Causes of the Difficulties in the North-West Territory in 1869-70, Ritchot never wrote or spoke publicly about what inspired him, and others, to become "resistors" in 1869 and beyond. What follows is an attempt to present, in the words of a major protagonist, the individuals, issues, and events that Ritchot considered to be the principal causes of the 1869-1870 resistance.

In April 1874, Ritchot testified before the Parliamentary Select Committee looking into the causes of the North-West "difficulties." Although focused mostly on the question of promised amnesty, Ritchot did speak briefly about the origins of the resistance.

> *The causes of the troubles arose chiefly … from the fact that the people had no notice whatsoever of the transactions which seemed to be going on … with reference to the transfer of the North-West Territory to Canada. The nature of these transactions was completely unknown in the North-West, and the people were dissatisfied from the first at being left in that position. That, so far as I could see, was the chief cause of the discontent* (Ritchot, Testimony).

Several years earlier, on 30 May 1870, in a two-part memorandum prepared for George-Étienne Cartier, Ritchot noted that when first hearing of the potential transfer, "the Métis responded positively", as they felt the existing government of Assiniboia "was not up to responding to the needs of the country. Nonetheless, they felt that the time for a change "had not yet come" (Ritchot, *Notes, "B"*).[1] Earlier, Ritchot had told Cartier, 'all awaited with joy the day when they would be permitted to strengthen the bonds that united them, for some these were bonds of blood for others bonds of sympathy [,] with Canada, thus becoming a part of the Dominion.'[2] However, the contradictory reports of the newspapers arriving in the settlement presented "the negotiations as more or less

1 *"Les Métis éprouvèrent de la satisfaction", "insuffisant pour répondre aux besoins du pays", "n'était pas encore venu."*

2 *"Tous attendaient avec joie l'époque où il leur serait permis de resserrer les liens qui les unissaient, les uns par le sang, et les autres par la sympathie [,] au Canada en devenant partie de la puissance".*

unfavourable to the interests of the population: which had the effect of awakening the interest of the people" (Ritchot, *Notes*).[3] According to Ritchot, the Métis were surprised not only to learn from the newspapers that the arrangements had been concluded but also 'to see that the Councillors of Assiniboia themselves could not provide them with any information (Ritchot, *Notes, "B"*).[4] Ritchot asserted that while news of the transactions between the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and Canada "did not greatly displease the people of the country, they did not seem to very much approve the manner that an affair of such great importance was being handled. It looked like all things were being settled without considering Red River inhabitants: almost as if they did not even exist" (Ritchot, *Cahier II*).[5]

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In his parliamentary testimony, Ritchot suggested further that the "dissatisfaction was increased at first by the conduct of a certain *Canadian* party" in the fall of 1868. The de facto leader of this so-called Canadian party, and the major proponent of union with Canada, John Christian Schultz, had arrived in Red River in 1861. He came to be seen by Ritchot as the bête noire behind much of what insulted and infuriated the residents of Red River. In his *Cahier II,* Ritchot is very direct. "On the other hand, the only newspaper in Red River financed and run by Schultz had over the last months – as was its custom – nothing but insults and contempt to hurl at the Métis."[6] In addition, Ritchot noted, the newspaper insulted the HBC administration which in his view had acted in good faith, having "resolved difficulties and rendered justice in as much as its authority



Ken Gigliotti, Monument to Louis Riel and Father Ritchot on the grounds of St. Norbert Church, 2013. Image Courtesy of *Winnipeg Free Press*.

3 *"Les négociations sous des jours plus ou moins défavorables aux intérêts de la population: ce qui eut pour effet de réveiller d'abord l'attention du peuple".*

4 *"De voir que les conseillers d'Assiniboia eux-mêmes ne pouvaient leur donner aucun renseignement".*

5 *"N'aurait pas trop déplu aux gens du pays, mais on ne paraissait pas trop approuver la manière dont se traitait une affaire de si haute importance. On paraissait régler toutes choses sans faire de cas des habitants de la Rivière-Rouge; pas plus que s'il n'y en avait pas eu".*

6 *"D'un autre côté, le seul journal de la Rivière-Rouge rédigé aux frais et sous la direction de Schultz n'avait depuis plusieurs mois – selon sa coutume – que des injures et des mépris à jeter sur les Métis".*

7 *"Réglait les difficultés et rendait la justice favorablement autant qu'il était de son pouvoir".*

allowed" (Ritchot, *Cahier II*).[7] It is perhaps not surprising that the Canadian Party and others came to see Ritchot as the *éminence grise* of what they regarded as the papist inspired resistance.

Ritchot also informed the Parliamentary Committee that difficulties were increased by the "arrival of a party of Canadian employees" in the autumn of 1868. Ritchot was referring to the work crew sent out by Canada under the supervision of John Snow to survey and build the Dawson Trail between Lake of the Woods and Red River. Ritchot told of assisting at a court hearing where Snow had been accused of trading with local indigenous peoples for "certain lands, part of which the people of the nation had claimed for themselves." Snow had been charged with giving them "flour, pork, and drink in exchange for these lands" (Ritchot Testimony).

Ritchot also refers to companions of Snow who were attempting to stake land near St. Norbert at Schultz's instigation. The individuals involved are described as "a few strangers accompanied by one Mr. Mair, Upper Canadian, who had come out with Mr. Snow, and William Hallett, all inspired to action by Doctor Shultz (sic)" (Ritchot, *Cahier II*).[8] Charles Mair was an early member of the Canada First movement founded in Ontario and had come out west as a member of Snow's crew. He had already gained notoriety for disparaging comments about the inhabitants of Red River, which had been published in Toronto. He famously was slapped and horsewhipped by Annie McDermot Bannatyne, wife of the Red River Postmaster. William Hallett was prominent in the English Métis community and associated himself with the Canadian Party as well. Ritchot's *Notes* prepared for Cartier tell of how the above noted land speculators were "stretching out lines and staking land upstream on the Sale or St. Norbert River and also at Point à Grouette [Ste Agathe] on the Red River which greatly displeased the population. The Métis conveyed to these agents the order to withdraw" (Ritchot, *Notes*).[9]

This appearance of Canadians seeking to claim lands near St. Norbert led Jean Baptiste Tourond, one of the St. Norbert Métis who had driven off the speculators, to action. He convened a July 5th assembly which named "a commission charged with ensuring that these strangers would not seize, to the detriment of the rights of the Nation, lands set aside and recognized until now by custom and usage, as commons, or by national understanding as belonging to one part of the population" (Ritchot, *Notes*).[10] Tourond was placed in charge of the committee to ensure that "no strangers establish themselves on the lands along the Assiniboine River following it upstream as far as Poplar Point and from there as far as Turtle Mountain to the boundary, and a bit below Fort Garry along the Red River including the Seine River, up to Lake Winnipeg and from their

8 *"Quelques étrangers accompagnés d'un M. Mair, Haut canadien venu avec M. Snow & William Halette, le tout sous l'inspiration du docteur Shultz (sic)..."*

9 *"Furent tirées des lignes et marquer des terres en haut de la rivière Sale ou St Norbert [,] et à la Pointe à Grouette [Ste Agathe] sur la rivière Rouge ce qui déplut fortement à la population. Les Métis intimèrent à ces agents l'ordre de se retirer".*

10 *"Une commission chargée de veiller à ce que ces étrangers ne s'emparassent pas au détriment des droits de la nation, de terrains laissés et reconnus jusqu'alors par la coutume et l'usage, comme communes, ou par une entente nationale à telle partie de la population".*

including Oak Point and all that easterly portion of the country from Lake Winnipeg to the boundary" (Ritchot, *Cahier II*).[11] The "entente nationale" to which Ritchot refers existed between the "Métis Canadiens-Francais" and the English-speaking Métis north of the Assiniboine River. One would be hard pressed to find a clearer definition of what the French Métis regarded as the homeland for their *nation*.

Dr. Schultz was also rumoured to be the "prime mover" behind the July 29 public assembly convened by a prominent francophone Métis who served as one of the appointees to the HBC's Council of Assiniboia, William Dease. He organized the meeting "for the purpose of demanding the money, or a portion of the money, the Hudson's Bay Company was to receive from Canada for the country, and moreover, to overthrow the Government of the Hudson's Bay Company" (Ritchot, Testimony.) In Ritchot's view, Dease was "[a] man without principles who was as much ignorant as he was vain"[12] (Ritchot, Récit). Ritchot then stated that he had "warned my people to be on their guard, as to the object of the meeting, as I considered it to be of a dangerous character."

It seems that Ritchot's suspicions were shared, "the leading and influential men among the Métis reserved their judgment and let it be known they would wait on more certain information before acting, and their opinion prevailed" (Ritchot, *Notes*).[13]

The arrival of the Dominion Survey crews at Red River in August was seen by Ritchot as especially troublesome. In his 1874 testimony, he noted that after their arrival "there were repeated difficulties with reference to the surveyors. The inhabitants demanded of the surveyors on what authority they came to survey the lands of the country. The surveyors never produced any paper or gave any satisfactory answer" (Ritchot, *Testimony*). In his Notes to Cartier, Ritchot writes:

> *In the middle of the summer a certain number of men, at whose head was Colonel Dennis, arrived in the Colony and declared they came in the name of the Canadian Government and that they had been charged to divide into lots, all the lands of the North-West and set themselves to work. As they only gave as proof of their authority to act but their words [,] the Métis enjoined them to produce authentic proof of their rights to carry out such works in their country; which they did not. Thus, the Métis intimated to them the order that they cease these works* (Ritchot, *Notes*).[14]

11 *"Aucun étranger ne s'établissent sur les terres de près la rivière Assiniboine en la suivant en remontant jusque plus haut que les petits trembles [Poplar Point] et de la jusqu'au-delà de la montagne de la Tortue jusqu'aux lignes, et du Fort Garry un peu en descendant la rivière Rouge renferment la rivière la Seine [,] prenant le lac Winnipeg et de là renfermant la pointe de chênes [Ste. Anne] et toute la partie est du pays depuis le lac Winnipeg jusqu'aux lignes".*

12 *"[Un] homme sans principes et aussi ignorant qu'orgueilleux".*

13 *"Les hommes supérieurs et influents parmi les Métis se tinrent sur la réserve et ils furent d'avis qu'il fallait attendre des données certaines avant d'agir, et leur opinion prévalut".*

14 *"Au milieu de l'été, un certain nombre d'hommes, à la tête duquel était le Colonel Dennis, arrivaient dans la Colonie et déclaraient qu'ils venaient au nom du gouvernement du Canada et qu'ils étaient chargés de diviser en lots toutes les terres du Nord-Ouest et se mirent à l'œuvre. Comme ils ne donnaient pour preuve de leurs droits et autorisations d'en agir ainsi que des paroles [,] les Métis les rejoignent de produire des preuves authentiques de leurs droits de faire de tels travaux dans leurs pays : ce qu'ils ne furent pas. Alors les Métis leur intimèrent l'ordre de cesser ces travaux".*

“No authority in the country had the right to assign titles to any lands beyond the lands Lord Selkirk had given to the HBC.”

Ritchot also felt that it was “à propos to remark”[15] that no authority in the country had the right to assign titles to any lands beyond the lands Lord Selkirk had given to the HBC. His May 1870 Notes also informed Cartier:

> *There have never been, even to this day, titles of ownership of this land except by virtue of custom and national agreement*[16] (Ritchot, Notes).

Cartier was also informed that the problems posed by the survey crews were found in the demeanor of the individuals involved. “We must also observe that in the midst of all these entanglements, several of the Canadian employees as well as several of the adventurers from Ontario made compromising observations on several occasions on behalf of their cause of a kind that to make the nation understand that its rights and its liberties were threatened” (Ritchot, *Notes*).[17] Ritchot gave further vent to his view of the surveyors in his *Cahier II*: “New arrivals under the authority of a certain Dennis bearing a pompous title and surrounded by employees with similarly pompous titles such as Colonel, Major, Captain, even down to the lowest valet of the expedition who wanted to adorn himself with a title and an air of grandeur.”[18] These surveyors, who Cartier is told are regarded as scoundrels, “canailles” by the Métis, after being ordered to stop their work and fearful of the Métis, were “prompted by Schultz and company” to work “on the open prairie”[19] near Pembina while the locals were busy with the harvest (Ritchot, *Cahier II*).

In his own notes, Ritchot wrote of a period of despair by the late summer of 1869. Those in favour of the transfer were happily making arrangements and planning to profit under the new regime. On the other hand:

> *After having witnessed the failure of all efforts by those from whom the people could anticipate aid, a few Métis, motivated by a young man of theirs, named several persons of confidence among themselves with the aim of taking into consideration the present state of things and to see if there was not some means to make at the very least a vocal protest against the injustice and the injury done to the nation by Canada... After being assured that they were within their rights and that honour demanded a protest, they resolved to oppose injustice and to repel*

15 *“À propos de remarquer”.*

16 *“Il n’y avait et il n’y a encore aujourd’hui de titres de possession de ce terrain qu’en vertu d’une coutume et entente nationale”.*

17 *“On doit de plus observer que dans tous ces démêlés plusieurs des employées du Canada ainsi que plusieurs aventuriers arrivés d’Ontario firent à plusieurs reprises des observations compromettantes pour leur cause et de nature à faire comprendre à la nation que ses droits et ses libertés étaient menacés”.*

18 *“De nouvelles arrivées sous la présidence d’un nommer Dennis revêtu de titre pompeux, entouré d’employés pareillement revêtus de titres de colonel, major, capitaine, enfin jusqu’au dernier valet, de cette expédition qui voulait se revêtir d’un titre et d’un air de grandeur”.*

19 *“Inspirée par Schultz et compagnie”, “au large”.*

the injury and the shame with all of their power and to employ all that justice and right permitted them even at the risk of appearing imprudent and reckless (Ritchot, *Cahier II*).[20]

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The "young man" was, of course, Louis Riel. The "assurances" had been provided by Ritchot whose parishioners had begun the process of organizing a coherent response. The "protest" was the unarmed but intimidating halt imposed to the Dominion Survey on October 11, 1869, by Riel, Tourond, and others.

For many, the 11th of October marked the beginning of the armed Red River Resistance which for the next three weeks was headquartered in Ritchot's St. Norbert Presbytery. There, under Riel's leadership and Ritchot's assurances that the cause was just, the movement codified "The Laws of the Prairie",[21] under which a council was elected and to which the "soldiers" swore allegiance. A wooden rail fence, *La Barrière*, was erected across the Pembina Trail where it crossed la Rivière Sale a few hundred yards west of Ritchot's home. An ever-growing camp of Métis militants began to take shape nearby. The stated goal was to prevent the Canadian appointed Lt. Governor, William McDougall from entering the territory and asserting Canadian authority without the permission of the residents. Efforts to either dissuade or divide the militants were made at this time as well. The efforts of Métis moderates, some of the "English" settlers, and an attempt at a counter-coup by William Dease all failed. Once it was clear that McDougall had been stopped, the decision was made to seize Fort Garry and thus establish firm control over the settlement after which a negotiated entry into the Canadian Confederation could be arranged.

> **"Ritchot's writings and correspondence prior to, during, and after the resistance are a key to a broader understanding of the movement and its principal players."**

The Red River Resistance remains one of the most discussed events in Canadian history. While much of the focus has justifiably been placed on Louis Riel, Ritchot's writings and correspondence prior to, during, and after the resistance are a key to a broader understanding of the movement and

20 *"Après avoir vu échoir toutes les entreprises des hommes de qui naturellement le pays devait attendre du secours, quelques Métis seulement excités par un jeune homme des leurs font nommer quelques personnes de confiance parmi eux afin de prendre en considération l'état actuel et voir s'il n'y avait pas moyen, au moins, de faire une protestation manifeste contre l'injustice et l'injure faites à la nation par le Canada... Après s'être assurés qu'ils étaient dans leur droit et que l'honneur demandait une protestation, ils résolurent de s'opposer à l'injustice et de repousser l'injure et la honte de tout leur pouvoir et d'employer tout ce que la justice et le droit leur permettaient au risque même de paraître imprudents et téméraires".*

21 *Les Lois de la Prairie.*



A copy of Ritchot's manuscript (An example of Ritchot's handwriting, Centre du Patrimoine St Boniface).

its principal players. While challenging to read due to a difficult script, his papers offer a trove of contemporary detail relating to the birth of Manitoba, Louis Riel, and the Métis. His own efforts to secure the verbal promises made to him during his negotiations in Ottawa but ignored in the words and execution of the Manitoba Act also are well documented in his papers. The above discussion is but an example of the perspectives to be gained from Manitoba's "other" Father of Confederation. Further examination will no doubt yield other insights and add to the knowledge required to fully understand Manitoba's complicated and controversial "birth."

REFERENCES

Report of the Select Committee on the Causes of the Difficulties in the North-West Territories in 1869-70; Journals of the House of Commons, Appendix 6; 1874.

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Ritchot, *Cahier II; Archives Société Historique de Saint-Boniface, Fonds Ritchot*, 0287/155/1.

Ritchot, Récit, Ritchot's papers also contain a notebook which features an undated récit that touches on the early evolution of the resistance. (An excellent transcript of the above was prepared by Alfred Fortier and published in *Bulletin de la Société Historique de Saint-Boniface,1998-1999-Numéro 1*). The original, however, did need to be consulted as Fortier, like so many others, had difficulties with Ritchot's challenging handwriting.

SEE ALSO

Mailhot, Philippe R. 1986. *Ritchot's Resistance; Abbé Noël Joseph Ritchot and the Creation and Transformation of Manitoba* PhD Diss. University of Manitoba.

Stanley, George F. 1972. *Louis Riel*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

It should also be noted that Ritchot's original draft of his *Notes sur le Nord-Ouest* can be found in the above-noted ASHSB, Fonds CACRSB, Série Alexandre Antonin Taché, T7531-7546.