Riel and the Manitoba Schools Question



by Arthur Silver
Department of History
University of Toronto

Seeing Riel as a tyrant and a murderer, anglophones called for his arrest and punishment; seeing him as the effective representative of a whole population, francophones demanded that he be amnestied.

Considered in the context of French-English relations, the Riel affair offers a striking example of the way in which language determines channels of communication and the information that people receive, so that different language communities can sometimes acquire vastly different — even opposite — conceptions of reality.

When the Red River uprising first brought Louis Riel to the attention of the Canadian public, there was no telegraph line and no regular mail service between Red River and Canada, nor were there any professional reporters in the West to investigate or to send balanced and reliable reports of what was happening there. Newspapers, therefore, relied to a large extent on private letters which individuals in the North-West wrote to Canadian editors or to friends in Canada who showed them to editors. Thus Ontario editors received letters from Ontarians in the NorthWest; but such people were generally opposed to Riel, and lived in a community of settlers who were opposed to him, so that their letters gave the impression that Riel was not supported by the population of the West and that he had imposed his rule by violence or the threat of it. Francophone editors in Quebec, on the other hand, received correspondence from francophones at Red River with whom they were acquainted — Riel himself and his secretary Louis Schmidt, both of whom had studied at colleges in Quebec with people now editing newspapers there, or missionaries in a similar situation. Their letters naturally gave the impression that Riel was supported by everyone, and that he was the true representative of the Red River population.

When Thomas Scott was killed by Riel's authority, Ontario editors and their readers naturally saw the act as a brutal murder by men with no mandate but that of their own guns. Francophones, though they might be shocked by the act's brutality, thought it must be accepted as a sort of de facto execution, since it had been carried out under an authority representing the whole Red River population. Seeing Riel as a tyrant and a murderer, anglophones called for his arrest and punishment; seeing him as the effective representative of a whole population, francophones demanded that he be amnestied. To them, it seemed that anglophones' insistence on arrest and punishment must be motivated by racial or religious animosity.

So by the end of 1870 anglophones had come to see Riel as a violent criminal, while francophones saw him as the target of anti-Catholic and anti-French bigotry; English Canadians appeared to Quebeckers to be francophobe fanatics, while French Canadians seemed to anglophones to be supporting a murderer from mere racial sympathy.

These views would determine people's reactions in 1885, when Riel led a rebellion in Saskatchewan. Anglophones now saw him as a repeat offender, a habitual rebel, this time causing a hundred times more deaths than in 1870. They expected, therefore, that this time the law would take its course, that Riel would be tried and punishment follow. Francophones, being suspicious of English Canadian demands for punishment, were more willing to take seriously his lawyers' arguments on Riel's behalf. They became convinced, in fact, that Riel would never have been hanged if he had not been French and Catholic, that his execution was only an attempt by the anglophone majority to hurt the French Canadian nation through this representative figure.

That attitude dismayed most anglophones. Riel, they judged, had twice made violent rebellions; this time he had raised an Indian war, caused more than a hundred deaths, shaken the whole country. How could French Canadians be so unanimous in wanting to save such a man? Surely they must be motivated by racial prejudice, wanting him spared simply because he was one of them.

But no country could be run like that — with two laws and two standards of justice: an easy one for francophones in which rebels were let go, and another for everyone else in which rebels were hanged. Canadian survival, therefore, seemed to require that English and French Canadians come together on basic principles; they must get onto the same wave length when it came to important national values. And in the years after 1885, more and more English Canadians came to believe that that could happen only if all Canadians spoke a common language and if children of all origins were educated in a common school system.

This reasoning fit particularly the circumstances of Manitoba in the late 1880s. Since the province's creation, francophones had been overwhelmed there by

English-speaking immigration, so that public communication seemed to require the use of English, and it no longer seemed practical to most Manitobans to maintain the official use of French. Moreover, more immigrants had come from Ontario than from any other place, and they had brought with them Ontario's prevailing belief in the separation of Church and State, and particularly in nondenominational public schools. Hence, Manitoba was ready for the post-Riel argument that "national unity" (an expression that only came into use in the aftermath of the Riel affair) required unity of language and of schooling.

This combination of circumstances gave rise to the Manitoba language and school crises, and indeed to a decades-long assimilationist wave that attempted to create a unified nation through forced anglicisation. Alas, it only succeeded in creating bitterness and resentment, whose effects are still with us.

In the short run, it helped to end the Conservative party's half-century domination of Canadian politics and confronted the new Liberal government of Wilfrid Laurier with a terrible dilemma. For Laurier came to power in 1896, thanks to the votes of Quebeckers, who gave him a large enough majority to offset his party's deficit of seats from the rest of the country. In Quebec, the campaign had been dominated by the Manitoba school question, which Quebec Catholics looked to Laurier to resolve. His electioneering strategy had aimed to encourage that expectation by emphasising that he was himself a Quebecker, a Catholic, and a French Canadian, and could thus be trusted to take care of Catholic interests in Manitoba.

But Laurier was not only a French Quebecker. He was also the head of a pan-Canadian party and a government responsible to the whole country. His cabinet would include Clifford Sifton, who had been part of the Manitoba government that had abolished separate schools in the first place. He had thus to retain support from elements with greatly opposing views of Canada — views that were more opposed than ever before, as French Canadians affirmed their nationality energetically in the aftermath of Riel's execution, while English Canadians looked increasingly to a national unity based on linguistic and educational uniformity.

How well Laurier was able to reconcile those opposing views may be seen from some of the views expressed in this magazine. ■

a decades-long assimilationist wave that attempted to create a unified nation through forced anglicisation ... only succeeded in creating bitterness and resentment, whose effects are still with us.

association for canadian studies
association d'études canadiennes

@cs·@ec

FOR DETAILED INFORMATION ON ALL ACS PROGRAMMES AND ACTIVITIES, SEE OUR WEB SITE.

POUR DES INFORMATIONS COMPLÈTES SUR TOUS LES PROGRAMMES ET ACTIVITÉS DE L'AEC, CONSULTEZ NOTRE SITE WEB:

http://www.acs-aec.ca

