

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

June 18-20, 2003

Saskatoon

Day 1 – Tape 5

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Carolyn Strange: Well, where do we search for heroic figures in Canadian history? The perennial favourite is the soldier, but in true Canadian fashion, we have not tended to lionize individuals, but rather the men who died in droves in the trenches, who liberated occupied countries, who made the world safe for democracy. But how do we come up with individual heroes we can call our own? On that score, Canadian historians have generally come up short. Not only are we boring, but the overriding drift in historiography over the past half-century or so has not been conducive to mythmaking, to the celebration of individual lives. The stress has been on social history. As a result, professional historians have largely left a vacuum for populizers of history, and this, controversially, is where Riel has come in. I want to talk about the recently, the recent televised retrial of Louis Riel, not so much in regard to what was said in the programs—since three of the people directly involved are present on the panel—rather what I want to do is talk about the exercise and the objections it raised in broader terms, as a skirmish in the ongoing battles over Riel, his past, and his place in the future.

Let me illustrate this through the text in one of the twenty-five bills, motions, and petitions designed to pardon or exonerate Riel that have been tabled in Parliament and the Senate over the past thirty years. For example, NDP member Simon Dion's speech in 1980 included two as yet unfulfilled wishes. "First," he said, "That this House do justice to Louis Riel and to all Métis throughout Canada by granting him a posthumous pardon," and the second wish was that thereby it would settle the matter once and for all. In fact, as I suggest, the first wish is much more likely to come true than the second. Perhaps the only body that wants to settle the matter of Riel's stature in Canadian history, once and for all, is the federal government,

which has never sponsored a government bill in favour of pardoning, but which has recently said apologetic and even laudatory things about Riel.

For instance, as many of you will no doubt know, the unanimous resolution of parliament in 1992 recognized the Rebellion, as they put it, as a movement for democratic rights. So, as the prime minister of the time, Joe Clark, read out, Riel, quote, "paid with his life for his leadership in a movement which fought for the maintenance of the rights and freedoms of the Métis people." In 1998, under the title "Learning From the Past," the federal government's statement of reconciliation with Aboriginal people included a remark that no progress could be made, quote, "without reference to the sad events culminating in the death of Métis leader, leader, Louis Riel." The statement ended by saying that the government will look for ways to reflect Louis Riel's proper place in history. Well, notably, the statement stopped short at defining what would be proper. It seems that the way that the government would prefer to fix Riel's meaning is by feeling sorry. They can't even bring themselves to say he was executed.

And this wishy-washiness does not characterize most Canadians' impressions of Riel. For those who think Riel was a traitor and deservedly executed, the matter was settled 118 years ago. And these people came out of the woodwork after the televised retrial, and the landslide vote for acquittal induced calls that this was revisionist history, that it was an attempt to rewrite what had already, indeed, been, been settled. In contrast, of course, those who consider Riel a martyred hero and a visionary leader, don't require a government apology or a pardon bill to confirm their impressions.

Well, where do historians come in? Very few of us have participated in this latest round of debates, which is ironic since everyone else seems to be talking about the politics of history, generally, through the specifics of Riel's commemoration. And when Paul Chartrand asked me to say a few words on the subject to start us off this evening, he asked me to assume the role of, I believe you might have said, disinterested and objective historian. Undoubtedly, I will have failed. For me, such a brief is like mapping the prairie with the gridlines that Lea-, Leanne L'Hirondelle talked about, while

somehow ignoring the undulations of politics, and I had this impression very strongly as I was flying in on a very clear day and seeing those rigid lines, which for historians would be name, date, name, date. Well, we can set down some certainties of names and dates concerning Riel, but I doubt that straight lines will ever be drawn through this historical figure. He cannot be flattened out, and if we continue to debate the trial of Socrates 2000 years on, there's no reason to assume that posthumous pardons, internet polls, or even boring historians will end the debate over Riel, Riel's meaning in the twenty-first century. Thank you.

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