

In his letter, Father André identified himself as a member of the local Conservative political machine. Both André and MacDowall were respected by the government. However, they were concerned with the safety of the local people. They did not want a civil war. Father André's letter quite clearly revealed that Riel was ready to change sides and cooperate with the government for the sum of \$30,000, or perhaps much less.

Certainly the federal government had no qualms about the use of bribes. Its whole political network in the Northwest rested on political patronage. In fact, Dewdney had recommended a payoff for the *Prince Albert Times* for its support. During the 1870 uprising in Manitoba, Sir John A. Macdonald had no pangs of conscience about giving Louis Riel \$5,000 to get him to leave.²⁴ Why then, did he refuse to pay as little as \$3,000 or \$5,000 to accomplish Riel's removal in 1885?

The letter from the prime minister to Governor Dewdney dated February 20, 1885, suggested that Sir John A. Macdonald's government was above such action. Macdonald wrote:

We have no money to give Riel. How would it look to have to admit we could not govern the country and had to bribe a man to go away.²⁵

It seems clear that Riel was needed by the prime minister as part of the plot that was unfolding in Ottawa. Riel, as a French-Catholic scapegoat, was to be used once again to enrage the Protestant Orangemen of Ontario and thus provide the political rationale for an invasion of the West.

Money or no money, by December 1884, Riel knew his work was finished in Canada. The Bill of Rights had been sent to Ottawa, and Riel recognized that he was not the man to continue negotiations with the federal authorities.

During the bitterly cold months of January and February, 1885, the level of political agitation dropped off in the North West Territories. The Metis and their leaders felt that the federal government would now engage in serious diplomatic talks with an appropriate spokesman from the Northwest. It was necessary to find a representative. Although it was Jackson's initial plan to present the petition personally to the governor general,²⁶ it was by now clear that neither he nor Riel would be acceptable for this task. Riel had not been recognized by the government as a British subject. Jackson recognized that he was seen by the government as too radical. What was needed was a person who knew and understood the Metis, and who also had some political influence with the Conservative government in Ottawa. Accordingly, discussions took place among the Metis to select a courier who would have both the interests of the Metis at heart and who could win the ear of the federal government.

It is unclear why MacDowall, who was the elected representative of the North West Council in 1885, was not chosen to act as spokesperson. It is quite

likely that he was not trusted by the Metis. Lawrence Clarke, however, was well-known by the Metis and was supported by Father André. He would be an excellent choice to carry the petition to Ottawa and to bargain with the federal government on behalf of the Metis. It would be a political coup, if Clarke, as a leader of the local Conservative hierarchy and well-known in Ottawa, would espouse the Metis demands contained in the Bill of Rights and argue their merits with his friends in Ottawa.

Father André, Clarke's old philosophical and political ally, was instrumental in the selection of the emissary who would take the petitions designed to accompany the Bill of Rights to Ottawa. Clarke was in fact chosen as the courier. The Metis hoped that, because of his position in the Conservative party, he would be successful in making an eleventh-hour compromise with the federal government. The *Prince Albert Herald* carried an account of the selection of Lawrence Clarke:

In the darkening clouds of dissatisfaction the Metis leaders still showed considerable forbearance. They asked the Honourable Lawrence Clarke, a one-time member of the North West Territories Council to proceed to Ottawa and make representations to the government on their behalf.²⁷

Clarke made the journey to Ottawa in February, 1885. Throughout the lengthening days of March 1885, the Metis were uneasy about the negotiations going on between their emissary and the government in Ottawa. Their anxiety and sense of foreboding increased daily as they awaited word from Clarke. But as the weeks passed and no news was received, the uneasy feelings gave way to fear, then anger, and tension mounted.

On March 11, Major L. N. F. Crozier, commanding officer of the NWMP detachment at Fort Carlton, telegraphed Commissioner Irvine in Regina, indicating that there were rumours that the Metis were expecting to receive a large supply of arms and ammunition from somewhere in the United States.²⁸ Upon receipt of this message from Irvine, Lieutenant Governor Dewdney informed Prime Minister Macdonald that there actually was to be a shipment of arms.

Although Dewdney felt that the Metis were organizing a bluff to give more weight to the bargaining that they assumed was occurring in Ottawa, he nevertheless urged an increase in the police force in the Fort Carlton region. He wrote Macdonald:

If the [Metis] mean business the sooner they are put down the better. They are like Indians, when they gather and get excited it is difficult to handle them, but if they are taken unawares there is little difficulty in arresting their leaders.²⁹

On March 13, Major Crozier reported that a Metis rebellion was likely to

break out at any moment. On March 15, Commissioner Irvine left Regina for Fort Carlton with one hundred police reinforcements. The same day, Father Fourmand made an effort to sow dissension among the Metis who were remaining loyal to Louis Riel: he delivered a sermon at the opening mass in which he threatened the Metis with the refusal of the Last Sacrament to anyone who took up arms against the Queen.

Despite their deeply religious commitments, the Metis continued to meet and mobilize. This mobilization, however, was more the result of fear than a planned attempt at an insurrection. No overt military action of any kind was taken by the Metis until Clarke returned from Ottawa. If there was any planning involved in the Metis mobilization prior to Clarke's return from Ottawa, it was probably designed only as a show of force for the local authorities, so that the Conservative party might take more seriously their demands spelled out in the Bill of Rights.

While awaiting Clarke's return, the Metis were attending a religious novena. During the novena there were political meetings at which the government was severely criticized. Potential allies were being asked to join forces with the Metis in the event of a conflict. But no direct military preparations were being made. Certainly no weapons materialized from the United States.

Clarke returned from Ottawa on March 18, 1885. He was met by a delegation of Metis who anxiously inquired about the government's answer to their petition. Norman Black wrote in 1913:

As a generation has now elapsed since those troublesome days, the truth may now plainly be told As a matter of fact the actual resort to arms was caused by an indiscreet remark of the Honourable Lawrence Clarke Early in the spring, Mr. Clarke visited Ottawa. On his return, while driving north from Qu'Appelle to Fort Carlton, he met a group of [Metis] who inquired of him what answer the Government was going to make to their petitions. His reply was that the only answer they would get would be bullets, and that, indeed, on his way northward, he had passed a camp of five hundred policemen who were coming up to capture the [Metis] agitators. While this incident has not figured prominently in former English accounts of the rebellion, the facts are common property to this day all through the Batoche, Duck Lake and Prince Albert country.³⁰

Lawrence Clarke's message to the Metis delegation was not an indiscreet remark as Norman Black presumed; it was the official government response to the Popular Movement's petition and the Bill of Rights.

But Clarke's statement to the Metis was false. There was no body of police on its way to capture Riel. If Clarke was referring to Irvine's force of one hundred men, it was not near Prince Albert. Irvine's reinforcements were camped at Qu'Appelle. Riel had not even been charged with an offence since

his return to Canada. Nevertheless, Clarke's comment concerning the police caused immediate panic among the Metis. The group that met Clarke rode immediately to the village of St. Laurent where a Metis religious celebration was in progress. When Gabriel Dumont passed Clarke's comments on to Louis Riel, Riel became extremely excited and cried, "*Aux armes, aux armes*" (To arms, to arms).³¹

A council of Metis leaders was immediately called, in which the Metis swore to defend themselves and their leader to the death. Raiding parties were sent out to seize all available supplies and weapons from the local merchants.³² This was, of course, interpreted by the European settlers and the federal government as the initiation of an armed insurrection. As well, the Metis took several hostages, people they considered to be spies. All of these activities came as an immediate and direct result of Clarke's comment of March 18.

Why did Lawrence Clarke give the Metis this false message? Norman Black suggested that it was simply an "ill-judged practical joke." But surely it was much more than that. The prime minister had been made aware of Clarke's ability as an informer and his potential as an agent provocateur as early as August 1884. In fact, Macrae's telegram in August had suggested that Clarke was already employed as a spy. It is highly probable that Charles Nolin, a known Metis traitor, worked closely with Clarke and André as an agent provocateur and government spy.³³

It is impossible to tell from the literature available whether or not Clarke was actually making history *sub rosa*, as he claimed during the campaign of 1883. But by August 1884, he was clearly recognized as an informer and a prime candidate for use as a double agent by officials of the federal government both locally and in Ottawa. Furthermore, government and police records from as far back as 1875 indicated that Clarke already had valuable experience as an agent provocateur.³⁴ He had been the person responsible for bringing the police to the region in the first place, thereby providing the military support needed to keep Treaty Number Six in line with the plans of the National Policy.

Lawrence Clarke had gone to Ottawa in February 1885, in his capacity as a political emissary of the Metis. It is probable that the plot to incite the Metis in to a state of armed rebellion occurred at this time. The CPR was in desperate straits by March 1885. If the CPR was to be saved by a "rebellion" of a handful of Catholics in the West, and if the loyal Orangemen of Ontario were to deliver more public funds to the hated CPR syndicate, such a rebellion would have to occur immediately.

Existing records do not indicate who Clarke met in Ottawa. It could have been Sir John A. Macdonald, himself, or one or more of his cabinet ministers. It does seem likely, however, that as an official emissary from the North West

Territories, Clarke would have met with high-ranking government officials during his stay in Ottawa. If the records are not clear about who Clarke met in Ottawa, however, they are clear about his movements on his return trip from Ottawa and about his later actions. On his return trip from Ottawa, he stopped in Regina at Lieutenant Governor Dewdney's request. Clarke may or may not have informed Dewdney about the plans to start a rebellion. There is no record showing what exchange of information occurred between Clarke and Dewdney at this meeting. However, when Clarke left Dewdney, he proceeded directly to his encounter with Gabriel Dumont and the anxious Metis awaiting a response from Ottawa. There are several newspaper accounts of this meeting. Both the *Saskatchewan Herald* and the *Prince Albert Herald* indicated that the Metis were in a state of excitement as they waited for Clarke. The *Saskatchewan Herald's* correspondent reported:

Lawrence Clarke is expected to return with the next mail from the East. The [Metis] I am informed can muster 1,100 men able to carry arms that are talking very boldly although they say the commission of any overt act is postponed until after the Lenten Session; while others say they have given the Government until after the arrival of this mail for an answer to their memorials.³⁵

The *Prince Albert Herald* reported:

The Honourable Lawrence Clarke brought back from Ottawa a most disheartening message. As chief factor for the Hudson's Bay Post at Fort Carlton, he had naturally the confidence of the natives and [Metis] who had traded for years with the great company. The message of the Honourable Lawrence Clarke was that the petitions of the natives would be answered by bullets.³⁶

Late in the day of March 18, 1885, Lawrence Clarke sent a coded telegram from Fort Carlton to Governor Dewdney in Regina (see Figure 1). Clarke used a code known only to him, the police and government agents. This document, more than any other, pinpoints Clarke as the man responsible for bringing on the armed conflict of 1885. Figure 1 shows the coded telegram on the right and the partly decoded message on the left. Clearly, the message dealt with the question of troop reinforcements and the proposed capture of Riel. The partly decoded message said:

From Carlton

March 18th (Key-45)

Apparently flattened out are tampering with Indians no success need be apprehended as ? may have to be made and essential reinforcements should come no better time to deal with lawyer ? and followers once for all. Albert to abandon maneuver will turn out arms should be sent back. L. Clarke³⁷

This Blank to be used for Commercial Messages only.

(T. Form No. 1)

Canadian Pacific Railway Company's Telegraph

Terms and Conditions—All messages are received by this Company for transmission, subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth in Form 1, which terms and conditions have been agreed to by the sender of the following message:

By Telegram from Sutton 13
To Specie & Reid
Applying stepney at Fort
carrying ammunition. Get
worded instructions. nothing
could be done
again as far as the
having both brothers
named minerals was
relaxation might
should be made
reference to the
to secure prompt reply to

No. _____ Time 3/18 1885

To secure prompt reply to

This Blank to be used for Commercial Messages only.

(T. Form No. 1)

Canadian Pacific Railway Company's Telegraph

Terms and Conditions—All messages are received by this Company for transmission, subject to the terms and conditions hereinafter set forth in Form 1, which terms and conditions have been agreed to by the sender of the following message:

By Telegram from _____
To _____
and letter to be care
worded instructions annals
to be done again
as far as the
having both brothers
named minerals was
relaxation might
should be made
reference to the
to secure prompt reply to

No. _____ Time _____ 1885

To secure prompt reply to

and letter to be care
worded instructions annals
to be done again
as far as the
having both brothers
named minerals was
relaxation might
should be made
reference to the
to secure prompt reply to

(Fig. 1)

Courtesy of Glenbow Institute, Calgary

Late in the day of March 18, 1885, Lawrence Clarke sent a coded telegram from Fort Carlton to Governor Dewdney in Regina.

Even after decoding, the message made little sense; the terms used were so esoteric that no one other than those people involved in the plot could understand them. But the message did seem to advise that there was no better time to capture Louis Riel ("lawyer").

The code itself should have been sufficient to keep vital information out of the hands of the Metis. The message was contrived so that it would make sense only to the conspirators. And it was designed to keep information from honest police officers, such as Major Crozier, who were trying desperately to prevent war and to maintain law and order.

Police Commissioner Irvine, now at Fort Qu'Appelle with one hundred police reinforcements, appeared to be awaiting word from Lawrence Clarke before dispatching the troops to the Fort Carlton region. On March 19, one day after Clarke's inflammatory statement to the Metis, Lieutenant Governor Dewdney received this enigmatic telegram from Commissioner Irvine:

Have you heard anything from Lawrence Clarke?³⁸

Why would the police commissioner, in charge of the police reinforcements now at Fort Qu'Appelle, be waiting for word from Lawrence Clarke? Irvine should have been seeking word from Major Crozier, who was in charge of the police detachment in the Fort Carlton area. This strongly suggests that regular channels for police information were being circumvented, and that Lawrence Clarke was the central figure in the scheme. Commissioner Irvine's terse telegram to Dewdney implies a connection between Clarke and the timing of the troop movement from Fort Qu'Appelle to Fort Carlton.

The usual time required for a forced march over winter roads from Fort Qu'Appelle to Fort Carlton was about one week. Irvine's reinforcements could therefore arrive at Fort Carlton on or about March 25. If Clarke was to be successful in goading the Metis into taking up arms against the police, he would have to do so before Irvine's reinforcements arrived. The Metis might not respond to provocation once the balance of power had shifted.

From March 18 until war broke out, Lawrence Clarke kept up a program of provocation not only with the Metis, but also with the citizens of Prince Albert, and with the police. After the Metis took hostages and secured provisions from the stores in their communities, it was Clarke who carried the message of their activities to Prince Albert. Captain Thomas Agnew, an officer who later participated in the battle against the Metis at Duck Lake, recorded:

When the Honourable Lawrence Clarke, Hudson's Bay Factor, brought down the news of the uprising, all the men were on the ice curling. There was less excitement than one might think. Messages were dispatched to all the settlers to leave their

homesteads and come to the barracks for protection . . . All the men were formed into companies of volunteers . . . Most of the influential men of the country had been told that an outbreak was likely to occur at any time so they were more or less prepared for it.³⁹

Although everyone was preparing for war, the *Saskatchewan Herald*, a politically independent newspaper with Conservative leanings, carried the following story of the mobilization of the Prince Albert volunteers and their planned trek to Fort Carlton:

The question, "What is it all about?" would persist in coming up. Look which way you would, no satisfactory answer suggested itself. The question of rebellion pure and simple was not to be thought of; for even if the French halfbreeds, at whose door the trouble was popularly laid, had any grievances that would justify revolt, their isolated situation and general poverty and want of an organized commissariat forbade all hope of success. It could not be a desire to exterminate the white settlers who are peopling the country; for the [Metis] are far from being a bloodthirsty race. On the contrary, they are as easy going, free-handed and good-hearted a race as is to be found anywhere — traits of character that sometimes caused them to be led astray by designing people.⁴⁰

But if the independent press could make little sense out of the government's troop movements, the Metis were even more confused. Major Crozier did not seem to be in charge of these movements either. Expecting the worst, Crozier sent a telegram to Lieutenant Governor Dewdney pleading for immediate settlement of Metis land claims.⁴¹ His advice was ignored. As a result of the government's failure to act on his advice, Crozier suspected that the Metis might attack as soon as the religious novena ended.

The novena ended on March 19, 1885. That same day the Metis attended a mass rally to celebrate the conversion of William Henry Jackson to the Catholic faith. They carried their weapons to this celebration on the pretext that they were needed for a mass fire of joy. In reality, however, this was a preparation for armed resistance to the expected five hundred police. Riel addressed the gathering at his eloquent best:

The Ottawa Government has been maliciously ignoring the rights of the aboriginal Halfbreeds during the last fifteen years. The petitions which have been sent to the Government on that matter and concerning the grievances which all classes have against its policy are not listened to; moreover, the Dominion has taken the high-handed way of answering peaceable complaints by dispatching and reinforcing their mounted police. The avowed purpose being to confirm in the Saskatchewan their Government spoliation and usurpation of the rights and liberties of all classes of men, except their resident oppressors the Hudson's Bay Company and land speculators, by threatening our liberty and our lives. The