

The Arts

Irish playwright returns for 'Riel'

By Jenny Pearson

Riel, since its first small-scale production by the New Play Society in 1950, has become the centre of a growing industry based on Coulter's portrayal of Canada's own real-life anti-hero. Before writing the play, the Irishman — at the time living and working in Canada — did some heavy research into national archives. "It was like chewing cork," he recalls. "I spent a year wading through them and writing the play."

Louis Riel, leader of the Metis people in the Canadian west during the nineteenth century, campaigned and fought for their rights against the government of his day. His career varied between periods of peaceful political leadership, banishment and open fighting, culminating in the Riel Rebellions of 1885 in which he sought to gain by force those rights which he felt his people were being denied.

Earlier he had been elected to Parliament in Ottawa as member for the district of Provencher, but was expelled from the House of Commons and banished from the country for five years. Between 1876 and 1878 he was committed to asylums in Quebec. In June 1884 he led a group of settlers, half-breed and white, in a protest against government indifference to Western grievances. The protest began peacefully with a petition sent to Ottawa but ended, as Riel became progressively irresponsible in his actions, in several months of fighting, with the Metis eventually defeated at Batoche. Riel gave himself up, was charged with treason and tried at Regina. He repudiated a plea of insanity put up by his defence counsel, was convicted and — after several postponements and an inquiry into his sanity — was executed at Regina in 1885.

How did an Irishman come to write such a very Canadian play? It began, improbably enough, with his meeting a Canadian woman, also a writer, at the London offices of the *New Adelphi* magazine, of which he was co-editor. They planned to marry in 1937, but on a visit to her family in Canada, she contracted tuberculosis. Since the doctors forbade her to travel for two years, Coulter decided to join her immediately in Canada — leaving behind all his London connections including a Home Counties series he had recently started for the BBC.

After a period living in the wilderness at Muskoka, where Coulter was able after

John Coulter, an 86-year-old Irish playwright now living in a modest hotel back home in Dunleary, has recently been feted in Ottawa during the revival of his play *Riel* in a full-scale production at the National Arts Centre.

all to complete his BBC series, the couple came to Toronto where his wife's brother introduced Coulter to the hallowed precincts of the Arts and Letters Club. Thus he made his first contact with the Canadian drama circuit, which eventually led on to the discovery and performance of his play *The House in the Quiet Glen* by Eaton Masquers at the Central Ontario Drama Festival. The play was a success and brought its author to Ottawa. Michel St. Denis was among its admirers and invited Coulter to return and work with him at his new London Studio Theatre.

Coulter decided against this, partly due to a premonition of war. Instead he decided to stay on in Canada and look around for a new subject. There was some discussion as to whether he could legitimately be called a Canadian playwright until Hugh Eayers declared to a meeting of the Dominion Drama Festival "Either John Coulter is a Canadian playwright or I resign." Coulter grins over the memory and declares, "I guess that's how I came to be a Canadian playwright."

Suitable subject

He then went round members of the Arts and Letters Club asking what was a suitable subject for a Canadian playwright. Without exception they replied "Louis Riel." So Louis Riel it was — and even before the script was finished, two producers were on its track. Brian Doherty wanted it. But Dora Mavor Moore got it for the

opening of her New Play Society in a tiny theatre in the basement of the Royal Ontario Museum, which Coulter refers to as "the test tube."

Mavor Moore played Riel. The *Globe and Mail* of Toronto declared that the drama shone in "the sharply explicit characterisation, the unflinching humour, the economy of historical exposition, the swiftness of action, all of which are most marked in the first half of the play . . ." but the reviewer considered the court scene at the end unexciting.

Nevertheless, an extended version of the court scene is now a popular tourist attraction at Regina, where it has been performed each year since 1967 in a replica of the original court room. This is just part of a "Riel industry" that has gradually sprung up around Coulter's original script.

Though well acclaimed, the original production brought no cash return for the author. The play did not begin to pay off until the CBC put it on radio, introducing French Canadian accents. More cash came with its production on television. The Canadian Opera Company used it for the libretto of an opera by Harry Somers, though Coulter claims they did so without asking his permission or giving him any credit until he threatened to take them to court.

Lavish production

Until now, the best financial yield has come from Regina. But Coulter declares, "The National Arts Centre has paid handsomely for this revival and brought me over for the rehearsals and to work on using more of the French dialogue which I had first put into Regina's *The Trial of Louis Riel*." All is lavish in this production — the opposite of the original "test tube" effort — with Jean Gascon assembling a high-priced cast to back Albert Millaire's arresting Riel. Robert Prevost has given the stage a wide, wooden setting and Gabriel Charpentier has set Cree songs to music.

It is the highest recognition yet of Coulter's status as a major Canadian dramatist. As an Irishman, he can also boast the great glory of a production at the Abbey Theatre — *The Drums are Out*, in 1949. It's a case of having the best of both worlds. ♦