

# Guilty or not? Riel's execution

by Lutfulkabir Khan

November 16, 1885, was the centenary of Louis Riel's execution. For one hundred years Riel has remained an enigmatic figure in Canadian history.

His sanity, his trial and the charge of treason against him has resulted in debates throughout the last century. Many questions about Riel still intrigue Canadians.

Last weekend, the Edmonton Medico-Legal Society, in association with the Provincial Museum of Alberta, arranged a public forum, 'The real Riel - a medical/legal perspective'.

Mary LeMessurier, Minister of Culture, opened the ceremony on Friday evening. Professor MacLeod and Bob Beal, co-authors of *Prairie Fire*, gave an historical background on Riel's early life, the 1869-70 Red River Rebellion, the 1885 Northwest Rebellion and Riel's trial.

On Saturday, the trial and execution of Thomas Scott at Fort Garry in 1870 was dramatized. Later, Justice S.S. Purvis of the Alberta Court of Queen's Bench, gave a judicial perspective on Riel's trial. Justice David Macdonald was also present.

They mainly dealt on the similarity and dissimilarity of the present day judicial system with that of 1885.

In 1885, Riel was not allowed to give witness for himself and was not cross-examined by prosecution and defence lawyers. Many questions were asked about what would have happened if Riel were tried in a present day courtroom situation.

According to lawyers Jim Robb and Jack Watson, a cross-examination would most probably have proved that Riel could definitely distinguish right from wrong and that he firmly believed in his visions. This would also have demolished the defence's plea of insanity and Riel would certainly have been hanged for treason anyway.

Psychiatrist, Dr. Sebastian Littman, looked at Riel from today's viewpoint. According to him the most profound change in Riel's life came when his father died. Riel was only 17, but from his diary and let-

ters of that time, it is apparent that he underwent a personality change. He recovered later, but this dormant personality surfaced again and again.

Littman said that Riel may have suffered from monomania (a psychic condition that describes a person who is completely preoccupied by a narrow spectrum like

religion or politics). Otherwise he was perfectly normal.

He thought Riel received a "fair trial. He was guilty. A pardon was legally impossible". If he were in the jury, he would have "voted in favour of condemnation".

On the other hand, Dr. Cameron, former Dean of Medicine, said that "Riel was no more crazy than

any member of the present parliament. He was a martyr to the cause, he had the opportunity to flee to the United States (he was a U.S. citizen), but he chose to present his case".

Dr. David Ward said in his comment, "Riel should have been pardoned for the sake of unification of Canada. The rift that started in 1885

still divides French Canadians, whites, Inuit and Metis".

The highlight of the forum was Regina lawyer and actor Steve Arsenych's performance in Riel's presentation to the jury.

The forum cast some light upon some previously unanswered questions, but it still ended with a note of dissent on many issues.

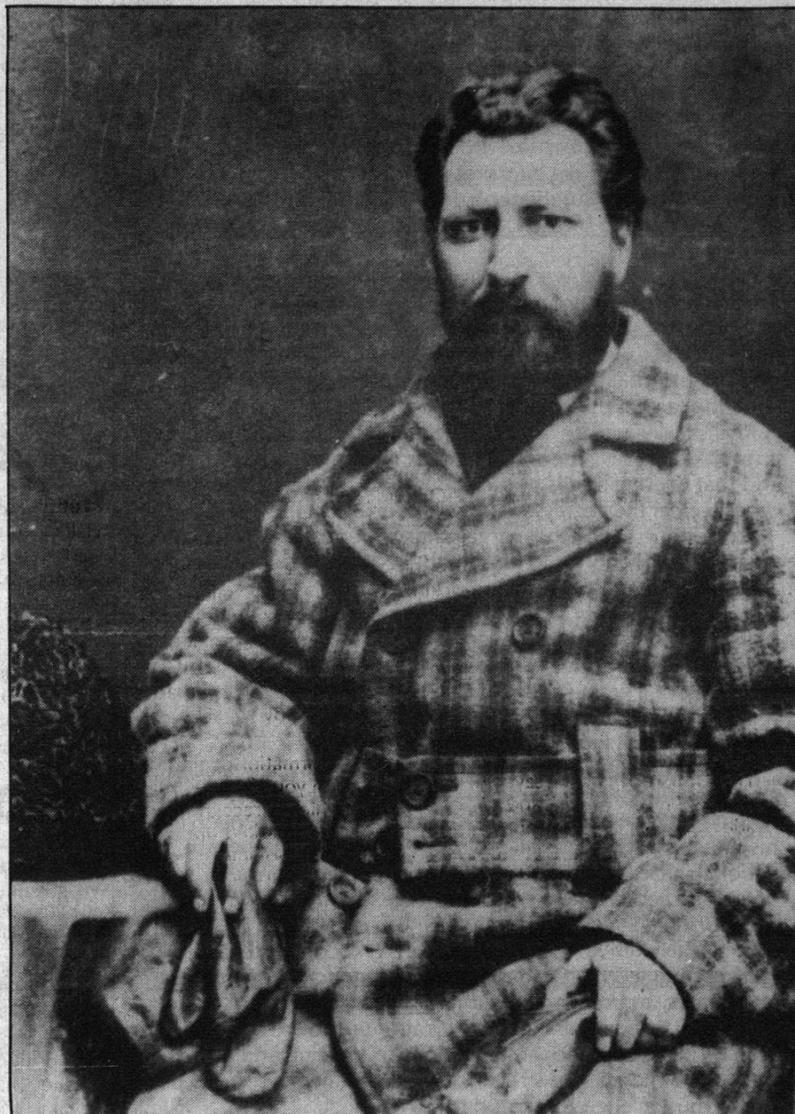
*Subjany 16 Mars 1870*  
*A Monsieur Tache*  
*Monsieur Tache*  
*Archeve de St Boniface.*

*Monsieur,*

*J'ai eu occasion de voir ce matin Monsieur Macdonald. La suite de Monsieur Macdonald est bien faible. J'ai le bonheur d'avoir pu être un peu contributeur à la tranquillité sous bien des rapports. Monsieur Macdonald a exprimé le désir de voir votre grand. Ma seule objection est que l'incident devait être traité en grand. Au reste, Monsieur, si vous le voulez, je suis prêt à vous rendre visite. Monsieur Macdonald, je ne suis que trop heureux de pouvoir vous assurer que votre intérêt auprès de la personne de votre ancien grand-père ne fera à aucun moment peine à personne.*

*Veuillez, Monsieur,*  
*agréer mes sentiments*  
*de respect et d'honnêteté*  
*Votre dévoué*  
*Louis Riel*

A letter to Bishop Alexandre-Antoine Tache - Riel's signs his name as 'President'



Riel - "should have been pardoned for the sake of unification of Canada"

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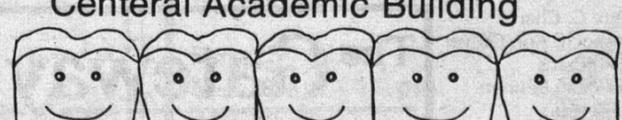
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