

FATHER McCARTHY PUBLISHES
FATHER LESTANC'S NOTES
WITH COMMENTS

To the Editor of the Northwest Review

Dear Sir:—

I received a reply, Feb. 27 last, from Rev. Dr. Bryce to my letter of a few days previous in the Free Press. I had made up my mind not to write an answer, considering it useless and hopeless. But since then I sent a copy of my letter to Rev. Fr. Lestanc, at Calgary, on the occasion of the golden jubilee of his priesthood. He in return sent me some notes of incidents of the Red River insurrection of '69 and '70 of which I was not aware.

I beg of you to be good enough to publish these notes, which I gladly translated from the French, and which I am sure will interest your readers. They will also rectify false impressions, injurious to Fr. Lestanc, created by some of Dr. Bryce's numbers of "Illustrated History." I think it only just to so worthy and devoted a member of the clergy as Fr. Lestanc is, that his voice should be heard in his own defence. I enclose these notes in quotation marks, and add some remarks of my own.

Notes of Rev. Fr. Lestanc on the Red River troubles of 69 and '70

"After being about ten months among the Indians at Fort Alexander and thereabouts, I returned in the fall of 1869 to St. Boniface only to find Bishop Tache gone to Rome and to find our half-breeds in armed insurrection. I being senior priest, every one looked to me as 'locum tenens' or administrator for the Bishop and to take care of the poor people in this crisis.

"I made up my mind to keep aloof and take no part whatever in the movement. In the middle of the night, on one occasion, I was sent for as parish priest to restore order and union among the men at the Fort, and I went subsequently two or three times to counsel peace.

"It was then I saw Riel, whom I advised, as well as the other men, to maintain strict order, and above all to prevent bloodshed. So far was I from being a 'familiar' of Riel that HE NEVER SPOKE TO ME OF HIS PLANS, NOR CONSULTED ME prior to nor during the whole time of the provisional government.

"Every time I went to the Fort I impressed upon Riel that nothing would justify or compensate the loss of a single life. When I heard of the three men—an English half-breed of Portage, Major Boulton and Thos. Scott—being sentenced to be shot, I redoubled my injunction, and pleadings on behalf of men who were complete strangers to me.

"As we succeeded in saving the first two, I felt quite sure that Scott's sentence would not be carried out. Even when Riel refused my earnest supplication, as well as that of Mr. Smith, I still retired with the conviction that it would not take place.

"ODONOHUE—Mr. William O'Donohue was an American from St. Paul, Minn., who came here in 1868 to study for the ecclesiastical state. When Riel was in Fort Garry he went to see Riel several times. At last I notified him, as his superior, that he would have to relinquish his communications with Riel, or leave the house, and his studies for the church. Mr. O'Donohue chose the latter alternative, and threw his fortunes in with Riel and the insurrection. I had no more relations with Mr. O'Donohue, nor did he write or speak to me of their plans during provisional government, nor after he left us for the U.S., where he died some years later. He being a Yankee, it was not improbable that he was an 'annexationist.' But I have yet to learn that I had any political leaning for the U.S. As to Mr. O'Donohue's subsequent acts I have no knowledge, except from hearsay, and still less responsibility."

Dr. Bryce in his answer to me of Feb. 27, says: "Pere Lestanc and O'Donohue both fled to the United States on the arrival of the troops. They spent the winter (1870-71) at Pembina Dakota, planning mischief."

"A member of the 1st expedition, well known in Winnipeg, informs me that he saw them during that winter in constant company in Pembina."

Now here is how Fr. Lestanc accounts for himself: "I did not go to the United States after the arrival of the troops, but I left for Qu'Appelle mission. Bishop Tache desired me to go to that mission as it was afflicted with small-pox. In fact the scourge spread its ravages along the Saskatche-

wan, over the prairies and threatening Red River.

I started on horseback in the beginning of September, 1870, for Qu'Appelle. When I got to Portage la Prairie I found a poor half-breed dying of small-pox, on the banks of Little Rat River, entirely abandoned. His name was Pierre Pepin. I attended to his wants and prepared him for death, which came a few minutes afterwards. As it was a dark night, I had to wait till morning to bury him. Next day I got some half-breeds to dig a grave. For fear of these married men catching the disease I reserved for myself the task of laying out the body, and performing the burial. Before leaving the grave, I felt I had caught the disease; the poor deceased had nothing to leave me but his disease. But I had to continue my voyage to Qu'Appelle, over 200 miles, in a Red River cart, slow and jolting, and I in an agony of fever all the way. At last I got there, and, heated by a good fire the small-pox came out, my face and hands covered with scabs. By precautionary measures none caught the disease, which left me shortly afterwards. After a few days, before being quite convalescent, a sick call came from Wood Mountain, over a hundred miles south of Qu'Appelle. I was the only available priest, and I started out with my half breed guide, in a cold season, and terrible roads, only to find my sick man already dead. However, as there were then about a hundred families who had not had a priest for several years, I yielded to their earnest supplications, and decided to pass the winter with them. It was then at Wood Mountain I passed the winter (of 1870-71) in instructing the ignorant, in curing and caring for the sick of soul and body."

Mr. Editor, I and others are living witnesses of these facts and thus the public can appreciate "the mischief Fr. Lestanc was planning in Pembina during that winter, in constant company with O'Donohue,—plotting against the British Crown." And people will see that the "Illustrated History of Winnipeg," though very interesting, is not quite reliable, so far as the truth is concerned.

Truth is a very nice thing in a history, but it is insipid and rather commonplace for an historian who has something else in view, if it be not to pander to the bigotry, born of ignorance, of his present readers, by ignoring and falsifying known facts.

That "well known citizen" "member of the 1st expedition," (whose name is discreetly withheld) who informed the Rev. Dr. Bryce, may be to blame. I recollect that the mirages on the prairies in those years were marvellous, but (unless intensified by a liberal use of the H.B.Co. 7 year old") I never knew they could transplant a man from Qu'Appelle to Pembina to be there seen "during that winter, and in constant company with O'Donohue." I would like to find a loophole for the slimy serpent, the "father of lies," to hide his head in this part of the "Illustrated" but I cannot. "Tell me your company and I will tell you what you are." I would advise the Revd. Historian to keep company with that great and good man, Archbishop Tache (whom I am pleased to see he appreciates), who gives the truth and fair play to all in his "Amnesty" pamphlet; with the eminent non-Catholic lawyer, Mr. Ewart; with Fr. Dugast, in his lately published history of the "Metis Movement;" with the official documents of the Imperial and Dominion governments,—and I guarantee that no present or future reader will call him a liar. This is the "considerable literature" with which I refresh my memory on the events of those times. Adulterated history, like adulterated food, is neither healthful nor useful.

Father Lestanc and Mr. D.Smith

Dr. Bryce says in his reply of Feb. 27: "At the mass meeting Jan 18, and 20, 1870, Mr. Smith says: 'Threats were used to myself in the presence and hearing of the chairman, the secretary, Judge Black, and others, more especially by Mr Riel and Rev. Mr. Lestanc.'"

Father Lestanc says: "Before the meeting I saw Mr. Smith at Mr. Mactavish's, and, knowing the dissensions among the half-breeds, and the racial animosity between them and the English people, I notified him that this meeting would be bringing fire and powder together, and that his life, as well as many others, was in jeopardy. Mr. Mactavish was also of my opinion. The night before, I was called out of my bed to quell or prevent a collision. I did not take any part in the assembly and left before it terminated. How then in justice and common sense, could Mr. Smith, especially in his official report, construe my words or conduct

into a 'threat' on his life?" (Evidently Mr. D. Smith was not a "noble" lord in those days, when he officially reports "a threat," whereas it was merely a well meant warning that his own precious life was in danger.)

Although Riel acted entirely on his own initiative, and quite independent of Fr. Lestanc, or of any priest, the Rev. Father has words of praise for him: "Riel never had the idea of ceding the country to the United States. His plan was to force Canada to offer advantageous conditions to the people of the Red River, before they would enter into Confederation. Her Majesty's Government, through Lord Granville, warned the Ottawa cabinet, that they had no right to force the people of Red River into Confederation, and the Colonial Secretary requested them to avoid any collision with the insurgents and to exhaust all means of explanation and conciliation before having recourse to force. 'The Queen,' he says, 'does not distrust her subjects' loyalty in these settlements. She relies on your government for taking every care to explain where there is a misunderstanding, and to ascertain the wants and conciliate the good-will of all the settlers of Red River.' (Lord Granville to Sir John Young, Nov. 25, 1869). In another dispatch to the Governor General (Jan. 26, 1870) Lord Granville says: 'I much more seriously regret the proclamation put forth by Mr. McDougall, and the commission issued by him to Col. Dennis; these have certainly enhanced the responsibility of the Canadian government.'"

Allow me, Mr. Editor, to quote Archbishop Tache, whom even Dr. Bryce does not dub a "rebel." His Grace says: "If deplorable acts can have an atonement, I find it in the very conduct of the leaders of the insurrectionary movement of Red River. The movement was never intended to be against allegiance to Great Britain, the British flag was never taken down, and the Fenian banner was never hoisted, notwithstanding the assertion to the contrary in the newspapers." (N.B.—I cannot, Mr. Editor, positively say, but it may be, that on Patrick's Day, 1870, when Riel gave a cosmopolitan dinner at the Fort, the Green flag along with the Union Jack, was flying. But the Queen herself was in favor of the wearing of the green on the 17th of Ireland.) "The Fenians as a body met only refusal or silence, when they offered their co-operation. The provisional government of Red River has repudiated offers that might have seduced its members, had not the sentiment of allegiance prevailed. Sums of money, amounting to more than four millions of dollars, men and arms, had been offered, and the whole was refused by those 'rebels' whom it is proposed to get hanged by the Expedition, after they had refused the help offered to attack it." (Amnesty Question, page 17.)

His Grace makes it clear to anyone but ignorant bigots, that the epithets "rebel" and "rebellion" are libellous, and out of place. The term is not historical nor official. It is never used in regard to Riel and his adherents by the Imperial government (Lord Granville), nor by the Dominion government (Hon. J. Howe), nor the Privy Council of Ottawa, which in its report of Dec. 16, 1869, says: "The resistance of these people is evidently not against the sovereignty of Her Majesty, or the Government of the Hudson's Bay Company but against the assumption of government by Canada."

People with their eyes open can appreciate the "Illustrated History" by these criticisms.

Mr. Editor, I beg to say that I am quite certain, that if things were reversed, and that if Dr. Schultz and his English following had started out to prevent the unconditional absorption of the country, and with as little bloodshed, secured the "Bill of Rights," which in the "Mantoba Act" is the "Magna Charta" of this Province, the French Catholic half-breeds would have ever since proclaimed their gratitude to the Schultz party, and would have never been so ignorant and ungentlemanly as to dub them "rebels," etc.,

It reminds me of the "dog in the manger;" the other fellow got the bone, and hence the snarling and growling ever since, and, shame to say, it is to this day heard and relished.

If there can be any palliation for the murder of Goulet, a loyal half-breed pelted to death by the soldiers of the Queen, it would be in Colonel Wolsley's proclamation to them before leaving the fort, in which proclamation he was dishonorable and indiscreet enough to stigmatize the half-breed population, in their leaders as "Banditti." Naturally these men felt emboldened by the

(Continued on page 6)

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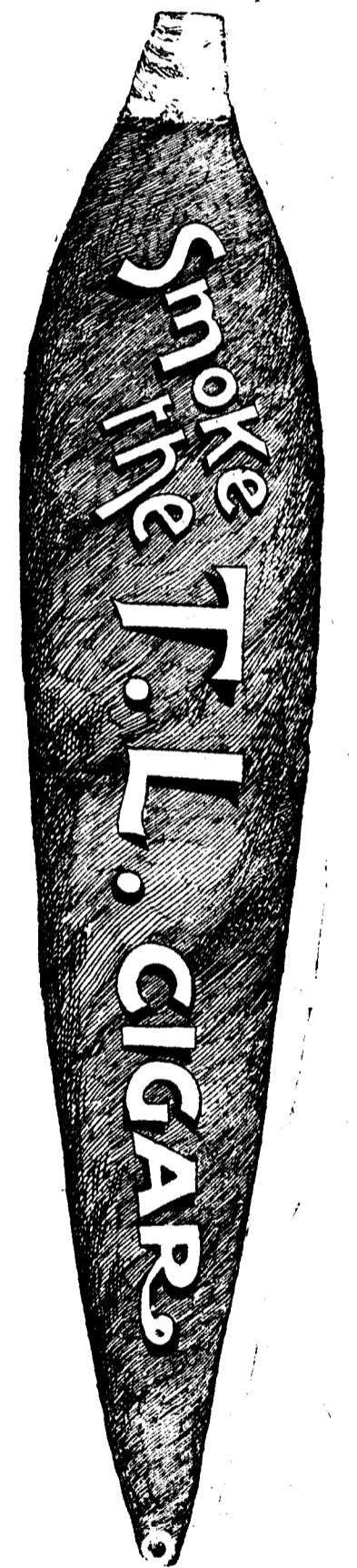
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