

Stanley Mission, Sask.
September 14th, 1952

Mr. B. R. Swankey,
Room 308, Wallace Bldg.
Edmonton, Alta.

Dear Ben:

I recently received a copy of the April issue of National Affairs Monthly and I read with Keen interest your sketch of Gabriel Dumont. It is the first article I have read which indicates the real nature of the Metis insurrection in Saskatchewan and places Riel and Dumont in correct historical perspective in relation to their times and the democratic struggles of that period. Much of this history has been forgotten, even by the Metis, some of it suppressed and some deliberately distorted to gloss over the vicious phase which marked the onward march of nascent capitalism on the prairies and to conceal the savage way in which these early pioneers were treated. Your sketch pioneers a phase of Western history which should afford a fertile field for future Marxist historians.

My grandfather participated in the Red River Insurrection as a member of the military forces of the Provisional Government which resisted the assumption of sovereignty by the Canadian authorities. He knew Riel. After the Red River events the Metis found themselves targets of abuse and discrimination by the incoming whites. A strong under-current of feeling existed against the Metis manifested mainly in economic pressure. Most of the natives lost their land, some by "legal" technicalities and others as outright victims of the rapacious land hungry whites. He joined the westward migration and arrived at Fort Edmonton in 1874 where he homesteaded at Strathcona. During the Riel Rebellion, together with another Metis Ben Vandal who was located on White Mud Creek, he was arrested on the charge of having had intelligence with Riel. They were tried by Summary court martial and sentenced to death. Widespread protest by prominent white citizens and the threat of a rising by the Stony Plain Indians resulted in the commutation of their sentence. They served six months imprisonment following the rebellion. He never denied complicity and to the end of his life detested imperialism and during the South African war was violently pro-Boer. In 1894 a Special Ordinance of the North West Council, based on an obscure legal technicality, was passed to exclude him from the Territorial Legislature.

Our family settled at St. Paul, in 1901, on the celebrated St. Paul Half-breed Reserve which in itself has a history replete with the vicious exploitation and perfidious cunning which has marked the white man's war for the land with native races everywhere. The original settler's of this tract included many Metis who had fought in the Rebellion.

A branch of the Dumont family were located here. During my childhood I heard many Metis accounts of the Rebellion. In the spring of 1906 Gabriel Dumont, travelling by wagon, came to St. Paul to visit his old friends and companions. Everywhere he commanded an unbounded loyalty and affection among the natives. On that occasion Metis and Indians assembled from many miles to meet and talk with the grand old hero. In his conversation he never used the term Canadians. The antagonists of old were "Les Anglais". In his farewell to my grandfather he predicted that we would again fight "Les Anglais". He returned to Saskatchewan and a few weeks later the Metis were shocked and grieved to hear their grand old champion had departed from them and rested, at last, in Batoche cemetery, among his old neighbors and comrades who gave their lives for the Metis cause.

I noted an inaccuracy in the account of Duck Lake battle. The Metis lost four men killed in this engagement all of them members of the parley group who were fired upon by the Prince Albert Volunteers. All the Metis present were emphatic in their declaration that the Prince Albert men and not the police were the first to open fire. During the winter of 1939-1940 I fished commercially, north of Lesser Slave Lake, where I spent many enjoyable evenings listening to the reminiscences of Peter Tomkins, and early pioneer of the Peace River country. He came to the Saskatchewan Valley in 1879 and was an Indian Department employee at One Arrow Reserve, near Duck Lake. He was captured by Metis scouts in the early morning hours of March 18th while trying to repair the telegraph line. He was confined with the other white prisoners in Duck Lake village. Tomkins, who later married the daughter of Poundmaker, the great Cree chief, had a masterful command of the Cree language and understood perfectly the trend and significance of events. He stated that Lawrence Clarke the territorial member for Lorne, contributed largely to the outbreak by his petulant rashness. Clarke had sympathized with the Metis, as his official correspondence with Ottawa shows, but upon the arrival of Riel there was a change in his attitude which the Metis detected. He recognized in Riel a potential political adversary and detested him accordingly. A group of Metis met him on the Humboldt trail. He had recently returned from Ottawa and they enquired of him what the government was going to do about their grievances. He informed them he had come from Troy Crossing (Qu'appelle) and he had passed 500 police who were coming to arrest Riel and his "shaganappi" government and enforce the surveys. In reply to a direct question as to what answer could be expected to their petitions he rashly added "The government will answer you with bullets". Tomkins affirmed that the Clarke incident created tremendous determination among the Metis to take arms and defend their leaders and homes from what they considered foreign aggression.

In the early morning hours of March 26th he was aroused by a commotion outside the house in which he was imprisoned. Richelieu, the Metis guard captain allowed him to stand at upper story window

Directly below him was Dumont and a number of mounted men. Scouts had reported that the police from Carlton were moving on Duck Lake. The party which had hastily assembled moved out to meet them. He counted 25 Metis and 5 Sioux Indians. It was this party which met and defeated Crozier. Dumont had despatched messengers summoning the men from the lower settlements to join them. However, when these reinforcements reached Duck Lake village they were informed that Crozier was in retreat. Tomkins was extremely critical of the blunders of the attacking force. The Metis scouts had reported that Crozier's force had cannon. He spent a few uncomfortable minutes expecting to be shelled as the house in which the prisoners were confined stood on a prominent rise of ground, close to the lake shore, and presented an excellent artillery target. He fully expected the Crozier would advance across the ice, launching a frontal assault, in which case, the Metis acknowledge Duck Lake would have fallen. Crozier's movement was tactically unrealistic. The Metis claim Crozier was led to Duck Lake against his better Judgment. While at Carlton he was joined by the Prince Albert Volunteers. This group were in the main Protestant Orangemen from Ontario with an accretion of "Quisling" loyalists from among the English half-breeds. Crozier had sent Sergeant Stewart with a small detail to retrieve the personal effects of Hillyard Mitchell who had fled from Duck Lake. This party had been warned and turned back by the Metis. Police scouts reported this development to Crozier. The Prince Albert Volunteers were for an immediate movement against Duck Lake. Crozier suggested delay until Stewart's return. Whereupon the volunteer commander told Crozier he would brand him as a plotroon and coward if he did not advance immediately. He also added they had sufficient force "to eat those breeds moccasins and all". Crozier replied that he would lead him to Duck Lake. It is noteworthy to record that this contemptuous exponent of the military mind was promptly despatched during the first minutes of the engagement. The North West Mounted Police with long experience in the country and many personal acquaintances among the Metis recognized in them adversaries of proven courage and resourcefulness and were anxious to avert a direct armed encounter. The Prince Albert Volunteers were confident that a mere display of force would overawe Dumont and disperse his followers. Tomkins recalled that the Metis held a large gathering to celebrate their victory. Crozier abandoned Carlton and Metis scouts ranged up to the environs to Prince Albert. On one occasion, a noted scout Jimus Short concealed himself for a day in the church tower at Prince Albert, observing enemy dispositions and at dusk drove away a herd of cattle within sight of the garrison.

It was following this gathering that the first break between Riel and the clergy emerged. Originally, the clergy had been effusive in expressing their support for the Metis cause. They fervently believed that in Riel and the French Metis they had a political pressure group subservient to their will. The French language element, in this period, found their main strength among

the French Metis ardent free traders with a local tradition of resistance to monopoly. It is true that although the Metis were illiterate their leaders knew what they wanted as the relative documents of the period amply prove. This trend had earlier crystallized in the Sayer Incident under the leadership of Louis L'Irlande and marked a historic turning point in Western history. There appeared a concrete nationalist feeling inspired by the confused resistance of a semi-nomadic people against the encroachments of civilization but vitiated by the ambitions of the French Catholic hierarchy for a political, cultural and clerical hegemony over the developing Western prairies consonant in its envisioned outlines with the corporatism of later day Italian Fascism. It is undeniable that the clergy fully supported the Metis in their political demands on Ottawa. The Bill of Rights adopted by the Metis significantly betrays the clerical influence particularly with respect to inclusive educational privileges and other economic concessions for the clergy. In the earlier rising in Manitoba the French Canadians were nominally sympathetic to Riel and considerable advantages had accrued to them thereby. The French party however, had based their efforts within strict legal and constitutional bounds. With the influx of the Ontario element had come the advance wave of pecuniary adventurism, the land grabbers and exploiters of every hue and degree heralding the full blown panoply of monopoly capitalism. The sedentary Red River French and the nomadic Metis were caught in this vicious maelstrom. While the French Canadians protested and appealed for redress of their rights, actual or implied, under the Quebec and British North America Acts hard headed Anglo-Saxon realists of the type of Schultz, Coldwell and Buckingham were carrying into effect the ruthless spoliation of the earlier settlers and the debasement of the native population. While the French orated the English acted. Due to the militancy of the Red River Metis the French Canadians and Roman Catholic hierarchy had achieved certain concrete advantages which were not seriously disputed until the Greenway administration deprived them of these solemnly guaranteed rights. The hierarchy had supported the Metis agitation in Saskatchewan in all its main demands. Riel's arrival in 1884 had been acclaimed by all sections of the populace including among them the approbation of the clergy. Undoubtedly, the hierarchy felt that a policy of moderate pressure by Riel would bring further benefits. Consequently, they encouraged the Metis to seek a revindication of their ancient rights in the North West Territories. The intransigence of Ottawa and the failure of the white settlers to take up arms convinced them of the futility of insurrection and the necessity of avoiding political association by implication. This led to their betrayal of the Metis in the best Machiavellian manner and their realignment with the forces of status quo repression. It was this conscious though belated realization of the clerical role which led Riel and his Council to repudiate the clergy. The behaviors of Father Vegreville is illuminating in this respect. During the siege of Batoche he had full liberty of movement. Despite their refusal of religious ministrations to the rebels the clergy were not molested. During the night of May 11 - 12th which preceded

the final day of battle, Father Vegreville entered General Middleton's camp before dawn and delivered a full report on the condition of the besieged noting particularly their dwindling ammunition supply and suggested an all-out immediate attack. Acting on this intelligence Batoche was stormed. Following the collapse of the rebellion he was hurriedly removed from the Saskatchewan mission field. To this day he is remembered as a traitor by the Saskatchewan Metis.

Tomkins related that during their confinement, at Duck Lake, the prisoners were visited by Riel. He recalled that Riel spoke excellent English with a decided French accent. Stating "Gentlemen, the fortunes of war have made you our prisoners but you have every assurance your life and property will be respected and you will be treated according to the recognized rules of warfare. If at anytime you have any complaints lodge them with Monsieur Richelieu, the Captain of the Guard, and he will transmit them to our Council". Lash, the Indian Agent and other white prisoners refused to talk to Riel but Lash did threaten Riel with the words "I will live to see you and your Council hanged". Riel asked Tomkins if he had any questions to ask. There upon, Tomkins enquired what Riel purposed to do if the rebel efforts succeeded. Riel declared that if the rebel cause was successful the Metis would summon representatives of all the peoples of the North-West to set up a National Assembly to meet at Battleford which would become the capital of a new federated republic based upon the division of the country into national regions having a common center with the boundaries radiating there from to the outer circumference of the republic, excluding, however, the northern and Arctic regions which were to be allocated to the Indians and Eskimo and others following that mode of life. Tomkins pointed out that in this hypothetical state the Metis would be a minority. Riel acknowledged this but averred there would be a community of interest in which all would share. Tomkins quoted his words "In this new nation all the oppressed peoples of the earth will find a haven and a refuge". Accordingly each immigrant group would be apportioned to their national region. All regions would enjoy local autonomy with direct federal representation at Battlefor. In matters of external affairs, customs and defence the federal power would be supreme. Tomkins enquired about land ownership. Riel confirmed the principle of private ownership of land with an inalienable right of inheritance. This led Tomkins to say "Mr. Riel, I can fully understand your plans for a republic and I agree with your ideas of land ownership but I can foresee a problem arising out of your proposed system of property rights. As you noted, these various racial groups will be arbitrarily confined within their national boundaries. We have the human problem. Everywhere men look they see the daughters of Eve are fair to look upon and love laughs at boundaries. From the youth will come new citizens who have a

loyalty to two races and this will be repeated continuously in endless combinations and variations. All these new hybrid citizens will inherit property rights inalienable to them by law. If a woman marries outside her region will she retain inherited land rights within her original region or will she upon marriage surrender them to the regional authority. I can foresee where people will find these multiple boundaries not only confusing but actually depriving them of their property rights. How will you deal with that problem, Mr. Riel?" For a moment Riel was visibly sunk in thought. He replied "Mr. Tomkins, you have posed a very penetrating question. To be frank I have never given it any thought. However, I shall give it my serious consideration and next time we meet I hope I will be able to answer your question". At this juncture Richelieu entered and conferred in Cree with Riel who then hurriedly left the room. Tomkins did not see him again until the trial in Regina. However, from Riel's speeches and writings it is evident that he recognized that the principle of the private ownership of land was basically responsible for the vicious exploitation of the native population. He was adamant in his hostility to the monopolists of his time but limited in his understanding of fundamental economic principles and had not lifted himself up to the level of comprehending in their entirety the laws of social motion governing the historical development of society. It cannot be gainsaid that he fought for a democratic opening of the West in the interests of the people and against the monopolies of the Hudson's Bay Company, C.P.R. and that array of land grabbers and soulless exploiters who built fortunes by filching the land and natural resources from the people.

In your article you touched on the myth spread by reaction that Riel was demented. It was the clergy who engineered the slander that Riel was insane and which was seized upon by the reactionaries to justify a savage judicial murder. Their rejection of Riel and ex-communication of the militant rebels was a desperate effort to rectify a political blunder which on a national scale endangered clerical prestige, inflamed racial animosities, disrupted national unity and if not effectively checked, by the hierarchy themselves, could have led to repressive measures by the Anglo-Saxon majority comparable to the politically motivated expulsion of the Jesuits from France. The callous sacrifice of Riel and the Metis people enabled them to regain their position without the expedient of open political compromise which would have been regarded as open political betrayal by Quebec nationalists.

In the summer of 1950 I visited Fish Creek battlefield. I noted the inscription the Historic Sites of Canada cairn which concludes with the assertion that the Metis fled from the field. This is a palpable distortion of the facts. When General Middleton advanced from Troy Crossing (Qu'Appelle) Dumont decided to ambush

them. He did not originally intend Fish Creek to be the battle site. The night before the battle the Metis camped at Tourond's farm near Fish Creek. At dawn Dumont sent out a scout, Gilbert Breland who returned almost immediately with word that Middleton's troops were in movement. Dumont set out to reconnoitre but discovered hoof marks left by a mounted party of his own men who had passed that way. He realized the native scouts with the government troops would correctly surmise the presence of the Metis. The element of surprise was lost so he ordered his men to fall back on the deep ravine at Fish Creek known to the Metis as Tourond's Coulee. At 7:30 p.m. Middleton's advance stumbled into the Metis outposts and firing became general. Before the battle Dumont counted 54 men. Seven men who had Winchester rifles were posted along the east bank of the coulee. Among them were Michel Dumaise, Isidore Dumont and other renowned buffalo hunters. This group numbered amongst them the deadliest marksmen on the western plains and contributed largely to the check Middleton received at Fish Creek. During the battle Isidore Dumont sang old chansons of Napoleon to keep up their courage. All through the day the sound of battle could be heard in Batoche village. Edouard Dumont wanted to lead a group to join the battle but Riel sternly forbade their departure maintaining their absence would weaken the main defence force. As the afternoon waned Edouard Dumont assembled a mounted force of 80 men defied Riel's instructions and rode toward Tourond's Coulee. They arrived at dusk but the battle was over. Dumont with a handful of 54 Metis, most of them poorly armed with old-fashioned muzzle loaders, had successfully withstood an overwhelming force of 925 men armed with 4 cannon and all the best and latest type weapons. In addition the Metis carried their dead and wounded from the field. Middleton retreated to a static defence position to await reinforcements before resuming the advance on Batoche. The Metis being a mounted guerilla force withdrew to await the expected attack. In view of these incontrovertible facts it is a deliberate historical falsification to inscribe this vicious slander on a national monument.

Touching on the Settler's Union. During the pre-rebellion period they gave outspoken public support to the Metis demands. Tomkins recalled a meeting held at Red Deer Hill during the winter of 1884 to which Riel was invited by the Settler's Union. Riel advised that every constitutional method of recourse be followed. He was exceedingly moderate in his views and the entire meeting endorsed his proposals. A single dissident view was heard. This was Captain Deakin, a noted Saskatchewan River navigator of that time. He agreed with the justice of the Metis demands which was supported by nearly everyone in the country but warned that the Tory government at Ottawa would not redress any grievances as long as Riel was associated with the movement. Later, he was one of a number who sought a mitigation of Riel's sentence following the trial at Regina.

A conspiracy of silence shrouds the role of the progressive element of the Settler's Union who gave whole hearted sympathy to the Metis cause. However, the main body of the Settler's Union became loyalists during the rising. The main strength of the Prince Albert Volunteers was drawn from this source. It is to the credit of the progressive wing of the Settler's Union that militants like Jackson and Scott joined the rising. William Henry Jackson, the militant Secretary of the Settler's Union is in reality a forgotten democrat of the Old West. Tomkins recalled that Jackson had already joined the Metis in Duck Lake before the actual outbreak of hostilities began. He assisted in a secretarial capacity to the Metis council. When Hillyard Mitchell's store was seized he drew up an inventory of the military supplies taken. During the trials there was no evidence produced against him proving actual participation in armed insurrection excepting his appended signature to this inventory wherein he described himself as "Quarter Master General to the Military Forces of the Provisional Government of the North West". The court adjudged Jackson insane and this flagrant distortion was propagated to belittle and minimize the fact there had been unity between the progressive whites and natives. To this day that lie has been fostered to disassociate in the popular mind the historic fact that unity was achieved. A similar parallel is to be found in the Conspiracy of Meerut, a generation later, when Lester Hutchinson the Englishman was gagged to conceal the fact of Anglo-Saxon progressive support for Indian independence. Jackson deserves to take his place in a People's History of Canada. The Progressive wing of the Settler's Union were the true forebears of those militants of western agrarianism which gave us our own A.E. Partridge and Carl Axelson. It is to be hoped the Marxist historian of the future will not overlook them.

In conclusion I wish to thank you for your effort and tell you I appreciated it immensely. Our Metis people made a great contribution to the democratic struggle. We have seen the passing of the buffalo, the autocrats of the early Hudson's Bay Company and the passing of our tradition to the militant labor movement of our time who are the true inheritors of our tradition of democratic struggle and we know that with their help we shall see the passing of the monopolists of the 20th century. With all best wishes.

Comradely yours,

J. P. Brady

P.S. Enclosing some snapshots (self explanatory) taken in 1950 when I visited the Rebellion country.