

*Ruth Hafter*

## THE RIEL REBELLION AND MANIFEST DESTINY

MANY OF THE PROBLEMS, both internal and external, which Canada faces today have remained unsettled through the almost one hundred years of her existence. Problems concerning national identity, bilingualism and biculturalism, Canadian-American relations, and the strengths and weaknesses of a federal form of government—all have weathered a century to harass scores of politicians and to provide material for generations of historians. Analysis and explanation of these problems is a legitimate task of the historian. But because these problems are so complex, there is a tendency to seek some overall formula which will explain everything and reduce history to comforting simplicity. Brebner's "North Atlantic triangle"<sup>1</sup> is one such formula, and another is the idea of American commitment to the dream of manifest destiny. Both can be usefully applied to the problems faced by Canada and the United States during the Riel Rebellion, but neither formula offers a complete or always logical explanation of what happened during that period, for history reflects the nature of man and is therefore rarely comforting and never simple.

In 1670, the Hudson's Bay Company secured a royal charter for control of the huge area in North America which came to be known as Rupert's Land. This area, half as large as Europe (exclusive of Russia), was governed solely by agents of the Company.<sup>2</sup> Since the Hudson's Bay Company was primarily interested in the fur trade of the region, settlement was not actively promoted. By the early 1860s, there was only one real settlement, at Fort Garry, and it was very remote and isolated. The isolation of Rupert's Land was soon, however, to be greatly diminished, for the American settlements on the other side of the 49th parallel were beginning to become populous, and St. Paul, Minnesota, became the entrepôt of the entire region. By the end of the 1860s, trade lines in the Hudson's Bay Company's territory ran north-south and there were railroad and steamship links between Minnesota and Rupert's Land. By 1870, the annual trade between the two regions of the northwest was about

\$1,000,000.<sup>3</sup> As has been noted, "the economic ties with the south were growing as those with the British territories withered."<sup>4</sup>

Spurred on by favourable reports about its available lands and good climate,<sup>5</sup> American and Canadian settlers were beginning to arrive in the Hudson's Bay Company's territory. But the majority of the settlers were still half-breeds, children of Franco-Indian and Anglo-Indian marriages.<sup>6</sup> There was a distinct cleavage between the half-breed groups. In general, the French half-breeds (*métis*) were Roman Catholics who worked as trappers and hunters. The English half-breeds were usually Protestant farmers. Both, however, feared that advancing white civilization would destroy their primitive culture and tighten the reins of government then held so loosely by the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>7</sup>

By 1868, Great Britain was attempting to divest itself of military and financial responsibility for its North American colonies,<sup>8</sup> but was not anxious to strengthen the United States by conceding additional territory. The most logical solution, therefore, seemed to be the purchase of Rupert's Land by the newly-formed Canadian nation. Such an action would forestall American occupation of the area and would encourage a Canadian counter-frontier. Canada, moreover, needed such a frontier if it was to flourish and become a great nation. The lands of Ontario were filling up, and Canada had to provide new areas for settlement, or lose much of its population to its dynamic southern neighbour.<sup>9</sup>

In 1868, the Hudson's Bay Company agreed to sell its North American territory to Canada.<sup>10</sup> In that same year Canada passed an act establishing a temporary government for the region. William McDougall was appointed Lieutenant-Governor of the territory and immediately departed for the area, intending to form a new government upon his arrival at Rupert's Land. At no time had the settlers of the area been consulted or even notified of the changes to take place. When news of the Canadian action did reach the *métis*, they became greatly alarmed. They feared the new government, which offered no security for their land titles, their religion, or their language. In October, 1869, McDougall reached the border of the territory, only to be forced out of the territory and into the United States by a group of armed *métis*, led by Louis Riel. From October, 1869, to August, 1870, the *métis* controlled the region, and for all practical purposes they constituted the only effective government.<sup>11</sup> Although Canada finally reinstated its authority in 1870, it did so only by acceding to their demands.

Why did the *métis* not join the United States during the period that

they controlled Rupert's Land? While most historians agree that the United States would not have been willing to fight Great Britain for control of the area,<sup>12</sup> a request from Riel for United States annexation would undoubtedly have interested the American government and might have led to direct intervention on its part. Economics dictated union with the United States. The territory was separated from Canada by seven hundred miles of rock known as the Canadian Shield,<sup>13</sup> but there were functioning trade routes to the south all centred in St. Paul, Minnesota. Moreover, there were no British troops in the area.<sup>14</sup> Britain's obvious desire to curtail its responsibilities in North America made the possibility of British retaliation against the United States seem fairly remote.

The small groups of Canadian and American colonists in the area were open and avid annexationists for their respective countries. But whereas the Americans were led by such men as James W. Taylor and Oscar Malmros, who were sympathetic to Riel and acted as his advisers,<sup>15</sup> the Canadian group under John Schultz was hostile, openly contemptuous of half-breeds,<sup>16</sup> and ready to engage the Riel group in active combat for control of the area.<sup>17</sup> But Riel chose Canada. His reasons were practical but not economic. Riel had a strong and unswerving attachment to the Roman Catholic faith, and the Catholic clergy had always supported Britain.<sup>18</sup> The American constitution, although it secured religious rights for all faiths, did not grant special privileges to any one, and Riel was seeking the special protection for Roman Catholicism that Quebec had been able to obtain with the passage of the Quebec Act of 1774. Riel used this act as his model and succeeded in obtaining many of the special Quebec religious privileges for Manitoba (the new name for Rupert's Land), with the passage of the Manitoba Act in 1870.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, although 5,000 *métis* could never force the United States to accept French as an official language, the fledgling Canadian government, dependent upon the support of Quebec, might be pressured into such a concession.<sup>20</sup> Rupert's Land was essential to Canada's future. Without it there could be no frontier, no link to the west, and no possibility of eventual union with British Columbia.<sup>21</sup> The United States, on the other hand, still had an open frontier and had recently purchased Alaska,<sup>22</sup> and it is doubtful whether its government would have been as willing or able to grant provincial (or state) status as the government at Ottawa.

There was also the Indian question. The *métis* were half-Indian, and England had pursued a much more honourable, patient, and honest Indian policy than had the United States.<sup>23</sup> If the Canadians represented a threat to

*métis* culture, the dynamic American frontier, characterized by its ruthless expulsion of the Indian, must have seemed a far greater menace. Riel, moreover, was not interested in destroying the status quo. He did not seek a new *métis* nation which would be either independent or under the sponsorship of the United States. His avowed aim was to preserve *métis* culture against the onslaughts of white civilization through negotiation with Canada.<sup>24</sup> All Riel's natural instincts opposed authority, but all his intellectual training was conservative, if not reactionary. This training led him to measures aimed at preserving the primitive religious life and static social conditions of the *métis* community.

Although religion, race, and language affected Riel's actions, these forces had little influence on the decisions made on the American side of the border. There seems to be little doubt that the Americans wished to annex Rupert's Land if not, indeed, the whole of Canada.<sup>25</sup> Alaska had been purchased from Russia in 1867, and the acquisition of Rupert's Land would have provided an excellent route to the American territory. Had the United States been willing to risk war, it could unquestionably have seized Rupert's Land. There were no British troops in the region. American railroad lines led right into the territory, and it would have been comparatively simple to transport troops to the area. The Canadian militia could not possibly have matched the American military machine. The only real danger was from England. In this region the powerful British navy could not have been of much help, and until late in 1870 there were no British land forces. Had the United States unilaterally annexed the Hudson's Bay Company's northwest territories, it would have been taking a calculated risk. The United States was aware that England wanted to shed some of its responsibilities in North America. It was also aware that Great Britain in 1870 was facing the prospect of possible involvement in the Franco-Prussian War. A nation facing war in Europe would naturally be less likely to initiate a conflict with the United States.<sup>26</sup>

While the American government was not willing to take such a risk, some of its citizens were most anxious for annexation at any cost. Minnesotans, who dreamed of St. Paul as the economic centre of the entire northwest, were most enthusiastic. Their senator, Alexander Ramsey, introduced bills in Congress calling for purchase or annexation of the Canadian territory.<sup>27</sup> Senator Chandler, representing the merchants of Detroit who sought increased Great Lakes trade through annexation, also introduced bills to acquire the territory.<sup>28</sup> And small groups of Fenians and American adventurers were gathered on the border, ready to attack and conquer.<sup>29</sup> Within the territory

itself, American expansionists were active, and for a time they seemed to be exercising a great influence on Riel. Oscar Malmros, the American consul, tried to secure American funds for Riel but was refused by the Grant administration.<sup>30</sup> James Wickes Taylor, the greatest American authority on British North America at the time, served as a secret American agent in the area and also worked for the railroad owner, Jay Cooke.<sup>31</sup> For a few months a pro-American annexation paper, called the *New Nation*, was edited by the American annexationist, Major Henry Robinson.<sup>32</sup> Important railroad leaders, especially Jay Cooke, also sought the benefits of annexation. Cooke wished to build a transcontinental railroad, but if Canada controlled Rupert's Land a Canadian railroad would surely be built and would draw off some of the trade which Cooke coveted for his proposed Northern Pacific Railroad.<sup>33</sup>

The United States annexationist movement, therefore, had money, leadership, and influence. But it was mainly a private movement. Chandler enlivened Senate debates by charging that Canada was a nuisance which the United States must rid itself of and by saying that "This continent is ours, and we may as well notify the world . . . that we will fight for our own if we must."<sup>34</sup> But the importance of the movement in terms of the number of people that it interested or involved is highly questionable. Aside from Minnesota residents, Detroit merchants, and a few railroad men, the American public was apathetic and indifferent. The English public was also indifferent to the opportunities and perils created by the annexation movement:

Neither in England or America did the general public pay anxious attention to the relations of the two countries. On this side of the Atlantic, men were much more interested in Tammany scandals, Red Cloud, Mrs. Lincoln's pension, the heathen Chinese, women's rights, Southern amnesty and assorted murder trials.<sup>35</sup>

Historians have interpreted America's desire for Rupert's Land as an obvious outcome of the belief in Manifest Destiny. Statements such as Senator Chandler's support this opinion. But belief in Manifest Destiny implied more than idle daydreaming. It meant a deep commitment to the forward thrust of America's continental empire, and such a commitment was not apparent in the actions of the Grant administration. Hamilton Fish, Grant's Secretary of State, was anxious to purchase the territory. He was willing to exert pressure on England to sell it to the United States, but he never contemplated a military seizure or even a very aggressive diplomatic struggle with Great Britain. There was none of the "fifty-four forty or fight" type of propaganda that had helped to move Oregon into the American fold.

There are many reasons for Fish's mild attitude. America was changing from an agrarian to a commercial nation. The rising industrial interests, strongly represented in the Grant administration, were more interested in protection than in annexation.<sup>36</sup> Except for railroad men and land speculators, this region had no more appeal than any other agrarian area, and many other areas could be exploited without the threat of war with England. America had so many potential regions in which to expand that it could not maintain an obsessive interest in any one. Alaska was purchased in 1867; in 1869-70 the Cuban revolt against Spain put Grant under pressure to annex Santo Domingo and Cuba, and evidence indicates that he was more preoccupied with these areas than with any part of Canada.<sup>37</sup> At any rate, if the United States had been willing to fight for any territory in 1870 (and it was not), it would probably have chosen Cuba, for Spain was a weaker enemy than England. Even within the United States, the South was a territory newly reopened to exploitation by the North, and many of the adventurers who would normally have been attracted to an annexation movement were busy seeking their fortunes in the South during the Reconstruction era.

Fish even believed for a time that Great Britain would abandon Canada and leave the United States to pick up the pieces. After the Riel rebellion began, many American annexationists argued that the United States should seize the area then held by the *métis*. They reasoned that such an action would deprive Canada of one of the major reasons for its existence, would weaken the bonds of Canadian confederation, and would drive all of Canada into union with the United States. Fish hoped to achieve this end by more peaceful means; at times he seriously believed that Great Britain would trade its rights to Rupert's Land for settlement of the Alabama claims.<sup>38</sup> However, when a military expedition was dispatched to the northwest, Fish realized that Britain was determined to secure the territory for Canada, and he ceased negotiating or agitating for it.<sup>39</sup> Although he did send agents to Rupert's Land, Fish did nothing that actually benefited the rebellion or even the American annexation party within the area, and he actually refused Malmros' request for money to aid Riel.<sup>40</sup> In March, 1870, the American State Department, for reasons known only to itself, decided to publish its correspondence from Malmros. His letters abounded in biting commentaries on the half-breed settlers of the region, and their publication forced him to flee the colony. Such letters could only increase anti-American sentiment within the settlement.<sup>41</sup>

There was therefore nothing "manifest" about the destiny of the United



States under the Grant administration. It depended upon the shifting winds of British policy, Riel's actions, the desires of America's commercial and industrial community, and on the availability of other territories for settlement and expansion. It is obvious that the Grant administration desired Canada—any rational government would have done so. Moreover, the Grant administration was justly famous for its ability to turn public property into private profit, and there was money to be made in railroads and land speculation. But the profit motive was only one of many factors influencing the government, and in the Rupert's Land negotiations it was not an important force.

Manifest Destiny was a much more important influence on Canadian government policy. Part of the reason for Confederation was the belief that union would lead to eventual control of the territories then governed by the Hudson's Bay Company.<sup>42</sup> Canada also believed herself destined to achieve a continental empire stretching from sea to sea.<sup>43</sup> Such men as George Brown of the *Globe* constantly and violently attacked the Hudson's Bay Company and promoted the cause of Canadian expansion.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the fiery annexationist party, led by Dr. John Schultz, seemed willing to go to any lengths—to endure prison, and to engage in battle—to secure expansion. Schultz fled the settlement only when he became convinced that Riel meant to kill him.<sup>45</sup> The United States had many potential areas for expansion, but Canada had only Rupert's Land. Without it there could be no transcontinental railroad and no possibility of union with the Crown Colony of British Columbia. If Canada was to become anything more than a petty state, it had to secure the territory in the northwest. It bid high for this region, but it attained its annexationist aims. The concessions granted to the *métis* were incorporated in the Manitoba Act of 1870. This act admitted Manitoba into Canada as a province, confirmed existing land titles, reserved 1,400,000 acres of land for half-breeds and their children, established a school system based on the principle of separation by religion, and made French one of the two official languages of the new province.<sup>46</sup> Thus Riel forced Sir John A. Macdonald to agree to the creation of a second Quebec on Canada's new frontier.<sup>47</sup>

Manifest Destiny had another important effect upon Canadian policy. Macdonald exaggerated the importance of America's annexationist drive. He was sure that the United States was tensely waiting for a chance to seize the settlement:

If anything like hostilities should commence, the temptation to the wild Indians, and to the restless adventurers who abound in the United States, to join the in-

surgents would be almost irresistible. . . . No one can see the end of the complications that might be occasioned not only as between Canada and the Northwest, but between the United States and England.<sup>48</sup>

Because of his fears, Macdonald felt compelled to ask Britain to send Imperial troops to the Canadian Northwest. His purpose was not only to restore order, but also to present the United States with visible proof of British determination to hold the northwest territory for Canada. England's quick response to Macdonald's request proved that Britain had not abandoned Canada and that its policy of retrenchment did not imply the total withdrawal of all British influence on the North American continent. The strong ties to the Mother Country felt by the Catholic clergy and the *métis* in the northwest region helped Donald A. Smith, the Canadian representative who negotiated the final settlement, to win the approval of the *métis* for the transfer of the region to Canadian control.<sup>50</sup>

It is a question whether the United States would have permitted the formation of Canada and accepted its westward thrust if Britain had not stood ready to defend her. But had the United States wished to seize Canada at all costs, the Riel rebellion would have provided an ideal opportunity. "Winds of change", however, were blowing across the North American continent, and the United States in 1870 was not as obsessed with Manifest Destiny as was Canada. The nation was united, expanding on its own frontier, and turning into a significant industrial power. The lure of northern lands was therefore not a decisive factor in the history of America during the decade of the 1870s.

#### NOTES

1. John Bartlet Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle* (New Haven, 1945).
2. George F. G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellion* (Toronto, 1936), p. 3.
3. Alvin C. Glueck, "The Riel Rebellion and Canadian-American Relations", *Canadian Historical Review*, 36 (1955), pp. 199-200.
4. Donald F. Warner, "Drang Nach Norden: The United States and the Riel Rebellion", *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 39 (1953), p. 694.
5. R. W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 119-120.
6. George F. G. Stanley, *Louis Riel* (Toronto, 1963), p. 8.
7. Arthur S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (London, 1948), p. 857.
8. Donald Grant Creighton, *Dominion of the North* (Boston, 1944), p. 318.
9. W. L. Morton, *The West and Confederation, 1857-1871* (Ottawa, 1958), pp. 3-7.



10. Stanley, *Louis Riel*, p. 42.
11. For the best firsthand account of the rebellion, see Alexander Begg, *Red River Journal and Other Papers Relative to the Red River Resistance of 1869-70* (Toronto, 1956). Other important discussions of this period are to be found in Stanley, *Louis Riel*, pp. 54-173, and Arthur S. Morton, pp. 870-910.
12. Glueck, p. 199; C. P. Stacey, "The Military Aspects of Canada's Winning of the West, 1870-1885", *Canadian Historical Review*, 21 (1940), pp. 6-7; Allan Nevins, *Hamilton Fish: The Inner Story of the Grant Administration* (New York, 1937), pp. 383-387.
13. Stacey, p. 3.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Warner, pp. 699-703.
16. Arthur S. Morton, p. 866.
17. Stanley, *Louis Riel*, pp. 104-108.
18. Mason Wade, *The French Canadians* (Toronto, 1955), p. 402.
19. Warner, pp. 710-711.
20. *Ibid.*
21. W. L. Morton, pp. 17-19.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
23. Brebner, p. 210.
24. Stanley, *Louis Riel*, pp. 65-66; Arthur S. Morton, pp. 896-897.
25. Donald Creighton. *John A. Macdonald: The Old Chieftain* (Toronto, 1955), p. 54.
26. Nevins, p. 410.
27. Warner, pp. 700-705.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 698-699.
30. Glueck, p. 212.
31. Warner, p. 699.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 703.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 696-697.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 709.
35. Nevins, p. 423.
36. Van Alstyne, p. 100.
37. Nevins, p. 397.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 386-390, 399.
39. Warner, p. 710.
40. Glueck, p. 212.
41. Warner, pp. 707-708.
42. Arthur R. M. Lower, *Colony To Nation: A History of Canada* (Toronto, 1946), p. 350.
43. W. L. Morton, pp. 4-7.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
45. Stanley, *Louis Riel*, p. 108.

46. Warner, p. 710.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 710-711.
48. Joseph Pope, *Memoirs of the Right Honourable Sir John Alexander Macdonald* (Ottawa, 1935), p. 58.
49. Creighton, *Dominion of the North*, p. 316.
50. Stanley, *Louis Riel*, pp. 78-99.

## IF WE SHOULD MEET OUR INNOCENCE

*Alice Mackenzie Swain*

If we should meet our innocence again  
at midday on a strange deserted road,  
would we destroy it as we did before,  
terrified by its beauty, and distraught  
by the white heat of its consuming flame?  
Or would we walk with it a little while,  
trying to charm it with dark subtle words  
or using devious blandishments to beguile  
it into shapes, less awesome and accusing?  
Would we corrode it slowly till it flaked  
away into a staining pile of rust,  
then wonder why no water ever slaked  
our conscience-fever of its murder thirst?  
Or would we slay, all swift and unbelieving  
That any act of ours could be accursed?