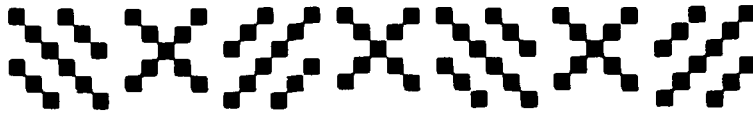


Louis Riel and Oliver P. Morton:
The Oddest Couple

*Helen Jean M. Nugent**



A letter of October 31, 1875, written in the hand of Louis Riel to Indiana Senator Oliver P. Morton, offers an intriguing puzzle for Canadian-American scholars.

Washington D.C. 31st of October.

1875.

Honorable. O. P. Morton.

Mister Senator,

I have to wright to you, I must say. My wish is to acknowledge very particularly, the honour which you have done to me, in hearing me, in treating me so well, when I had come to you, alone and without any introduction.

The high rank you have in the Esteem as well as in the Senate of the great american people tells me how to appreciate the interviews you have kindly granted to me.

Perhaps it is not entirely out of place to say, Mister Senator, that, during my visit to Indianapolis, I have been so slow in developping you my plan, I felt this time such a difficulty to expres my thoughts in english, that I caused you to beleive my plan impossible. The fact is, I have only shown you the skeleton of it. I have exhibited none of the details which would have made it look different, Your objections are sound. But I am not discouraged They are foreseen in my plan. As I told you I hope the divine Providence will help me. My interviews with you, though unsuccessfull, I consider them as so much done towards succes. You have accorded several interviews, you have been very indulgent.

Mister Senator, I keep your name amongst those of my most respected friends.¹

In this letter Riel writes of a plan that he had presented in previously held personal interviews with Morton. Collusion between Riel, who had led two rebellions against the government

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¹ Louis Riel to Oliver P. Morton, draft, October 31, 1875, Louis Riel Collection, number 316 (Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Winnipeg).



LOUIS "DAVID" RIEL

Courtesy Glenbow Archives, Glenbow-Alberta
Institute, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

of Canada, and Morton, a leading Republican Radical who had tenaciously supported the Union against southern rebellion, strains the bounds of credulity. Even against the background of the post-Civil War decade, a period of scandalous corruption and many shady deals, correspondence between these two men is astonishing. Unfortunately, no references to Riel's letters or plans have been found in extant Morton papers. Riel's writings, however, indicate that the Métis cast Morton in his hopes and dreams for a Métis province that would negotiate through strength for entrance into the Dominion of Canada or, perhaps, remain outside the Dominion as a colony of Victoria's English crown.

Canadian history contains no more perplexing enigma than the complex character of Riel and his leadership of the half-breed French and Indian people in Canada in two uprisings against the fledgling Dominion government. Riel first appeared on the national scene in 1869 as "secretary" then "president" of a self-proclaimed "provisional government" formed to challenge the government of John A. Macdonald, which was attempting to extend the Dominion of Canada beyond the Ontario border into what is today Manitoba.² In 1884 Riel returned from exile in the Montana territory once more to lead the Métis in a challenge to the government of Sir John A. Macdonald—this time over Canadian expansion into the present-day area of Saskatchewan.³

Canada takes great pride in claiming evolution, rather than revolution, as the source of self-government. A figure who led two uprisings within fifteen years would thus be regarded

² After formation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, the Hudson's Bay Company had agreed to surrender claim to certain western lands to the new government. Half-breed Métis and native Indians had been squatting on these lands, and led by Riel, they resisted governmental efforts to survey the territory in preparation for the formation of the new province. The government in Ottawa refused to recognize the Métis' claims and sent troops to suppress this Red River Rebellion in 1870. Riel went into exile in the United States.

³ In 1884 the Métis were again threatened by westward expansion, this time by the Canadian Pacific Railway and the resulting slaughter of buffalo. They recalled Riel to lead the North West Rebellion attempt, which effort was quelled by the Canadian government. Riel was found guilty of treason and hanged in 1885. Strictly speaking, the action in Manitoba was not a "rebellion" due to the lack of certainty over duly constituted authority. See Joseph Kinsey Howard, *Strange Empire: Louis Riel and the Métis People* (Toronto, 1974), 113. In 1884 the Northwest Territories had a recognizable form of authority, and Riel was subject to the charge of high treason. See D. H. Brown, "The Meaning of Treason in 1885," *Saskatchewan History*, XXVIII (Spring, 1975), 65-73.

as dangerous, deranged, or demonic—and Riel has been described as each.⁴ The Macdonald government, acquiescing in if not abetting Riel's stateside exile after the Red River uprising was ended in 1870, branded him as dangerous and charged him with high treason at the 1885 trial that followed his second revolt. Riel's friends knew that conviction meant death and realized that his actions had often seemed to lack rational explanation. They were strong in urging Riel's defense upon grounds of insanity by reminding the court of his two years in asylum and his seeming mental instabilities. Priests of the Roman Catholic church in French Canada, aghast at Riel's claims of divine mission and his rambling verbal attacks upon the hierarchy that he had once studied to join, tried to diminish his prestige among the Métis by reminding parishioners that his statements and claims were heretical and inspired by the devil rather than divinity.

The hanging of Riel in Regina, in the present-day province of Saskatchewan, did not put an end to this controversy. Instead, the government created a martyr for the Métis people, and because Riel was a francophone and a Roman Catholic of Quebec heritage, he also became a champion for generations of Quebec nationalists. Ontario anglophones, incensed by the execution of Protestant Orangeman Thomas Scott in 1870 and suspicious of any who dared challenge the dream of the Union Jack flying *a mari usque ad mare*, viewed Riel as a traitorous heathen who had gotten his just and fair punishment under the nation's laws. In recent years Riel's martyrdom has taken on new significance as the Métis seek rights under Canadian law as a native minority. The one-time leader of the "half-breed" nation is now a champion of aboriginal rights despite the fact that his heritage was at most one-eighth Indian.

⁴ Varying views of Riel are presented in Hartwell Bowsfield, ed., *Louis Riel: Rebel of the Western Frontier or Victim of Politics and Prejudice?* (Toronto, 1969), George H. Needler, *Louis Riel: The Rebellion of 1885* (Toronto, 1957), and Robert W. W. Robertson, *The Execution of Thomas Scott* (Don Mills, Ontario, 1968). In addition, a number of articles dealing with Riel's sanity have been written. Particularly good on his pretrial state is E. R. Markson, "The Life and Death of Louis Riel: A Study in Forensic Psychiatry [Part I], A Psychoanalytic Commentary," *Canadian Psychiatric Association Journal*, X (August, 1965), 246-52.

Riel's career has been studied and chronicled from every angle in hundreds of books and articles during the past century.⁵ One of the most unusual of many bizarre episodes was the Métis leader's intense faith in Morton as a source of aid and assistance. Several works have documented the Morton connection in passing, but none has dealt with the incongruity of the choice. No currently available book or article implies that Morton was in any way sympathetic to Riel or to his cause. In fact, nothing in Morton's personal papers suggests that he even knew of Riel beyond discussions on the Senate floor.⁶ Riel's letter, however, indicates that they had met at least twice and talked at length.

Morton, as Civil War governor of Indiana, was well known for his prompt and loyal championing of the Union cause and for his condemnation of the southern rebellion. Although a Democrat in his early career, Morton conclusively severed his ties to that party after the Wilmot Proviso controversy, and he attended the Pittsburgh convention of 1854 that marked the Republicans' emergence as a force in national politics. In the Senate, after 1867, Morton's attitudes toward the readmittance

⁵ Alan F. J. Artibise, *Western Canada Since 1870: A Select Bibliography* (Vancouver, 1978) deals with the Riel rebellions in section 2, pages 62-70. For all aspects of the history of the Métis people, see John W. Friesen and Terry Lusty, *The Métis of Canada: An Annotated Bibliography* (Toronto, 1980). Readers who are unfamiliar with Riel and the Métis uprisings will profit especially from George F. G. Stanley, *Louis Riel* (Toronto, 1963); Howard, *Strange Empire*; and George Woodcock, *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and His Lost World* (Edmonton, 1975). A recent article is Douglas Owram, "The Myth of Louis Riel," *Canadian Historical Review*, LXIII (September, 1982), 315-30. The Métis insurrections had ramifications in Ontario and Quebec and affected the westward expansion of Canada, topics which are discussed in every Canadian history text. An especially good perspective on the 1869-1870 Red River uprising is included in William L. Morton, *Manitoba: A History* (Toronto, 1967). Both the Red River and Northwest rebellions are viewed as inevitable clashes growing out of violations of aboriginal rights in George F. G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions* (Toronto, 1961). As frequently happens, this intriguing historical event has been the focus for novels and drama. Rudy Wiebe has based two very popular novels on the uprisings: *The Scorched Wood People* (Toronto, 1977) and *The Temptations of Big Bear* (Toronto, 1973). John Coulter has written two successful plays based on the Métis leader. *Riel*, first produced in 1950, was televised in 1961 by CBC and published in 1962. During the Centennial of Canadian Confederation in 1967, *The Trial of Louis Riel* was produced in Regina and has become an annual event there. The exact transcript of the trial and an excellent historical introduction are included in Desmond Morton, *The Queen v. Louis Riel* (Toronto, 1974).

⁶ Morton's extant papers are few and are not completely cataloged.

of southern states became increasingly Radical.⁷ His leadership in the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments, whether inspired by the desire to punish southern rebels or a sincere wish to obtain rights for freedmen, added to his reputation and prompted a black Senate colleague to rank him with Abraham Lincoln and Charles Sumner as "respected and revered" by "the colored people of the South."⁸

The letter that Riel wrote to Morton in 1875 dates from a very traumatic, controversial period in the Métis leader's life. He had been wandering through the United States and Canada since the downfall of his provisional government in 1870. Twice his people had selected him for Parliament to represent the riding of Provencher, Manitoba. Due to political intrigues in the Macdonald-Cartier government in Ottawa, as well as to fear of threats to his life in hostile Ontario, he had never been able to take the seat. Early in 1875 Riel was pardoned for his part in the Red River uprising, but only on the condition that he would remain outside Canada for five more years. One historian has suggested that the period from October, 1873, to December, 1875, was Riel's time of greatest uncertainty. Doubts over whether he was destined to be a political leader or a religious leader had plagued the Canadian since his father's death in 1864. Shortly after that event, Louis had terminated his studies at the College of the Sulpician Fathers in Montreal. By 1873 his indecision and uncertainty had led to the mental anguish that would result in visions, prophecies of a divine mission, and eventual commitment in a violent state to an asylum for the insane from 1876 to 1878.⁹ During the months just prior to his commitment Riel contacted Morton and also appealed twice to President Ulysses S. Grant: first to ask for an appointment to the Department of Indian Affairs and second to present to Grant an outline of the plan that he had earlier suggested to Morton.¹⁰

⁷ Morton is the subject of sketches in Clarence L. Barnhart, ed., *New Century Cyclopedia of Names* (3 vols., New York, 1954), II, 1834; and *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1971* . . . (Washington, 1971), 1446. His role as governor and senator is well described in Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, 1850-1880* (Indianapolis, 1965).

⁸ Address of Senator Blanche Bruce of Mississippi to the United States Senate, January 17, 1878, in *Memorial Addresses on the Life and Character of Oliver P. Morton* . . . (Washington, 1878), 54.

⁹ Frank W. Anderson, "Louis Riel's Insanity Reconsidered," *Saskatchewan History*, III (Autumn, 1950), 104-10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106; see also Hartwell Bowsfield, ed., "Louis Riel's Letter to President Grant, 1875," *Saskatchewan History*, XXI (Spring, 1968), 67-75.

Riel planned to create a new province in the Northwest Territory, between Manitoba and British Columbia, which would be populated by French Canadians, Franco-Americans, Irish Catholics (not Fenians or Orangemen), assimilated Indians, and recent European immigrants who might not find a welcome in other regions. Although he never expressed it in such terms, Riel apparently envisioned a Roman Catholic state where French would be the dominant language. At no time did he ever request direct intervention by the United States government. The primary objective of his appeal to the Grant administration was for assurances that (1) his new government would be allowed to sell bonds in and to the United States, (2) the American government would maintain strict neutrality in refusing to allow Canadian and/or British forces to cross United States territories to reach the new province, and (3) free emigration would be allowed for stateside residents who might wish to live in the new region.¹¹

Riel had no wish to establish an area that would be annexed by the United States. If he had been amenable to such a scheme, he would have had ample support from the border states and their congressmen. Ignatius Donnelly, one of the most avid expansionists of all time, had opened his professional lecturing career in 1869 with a defense of Riel's actions in Manitoba.¹² Senator Alexander Ramsey of Minnesota had offered a resolution to the Senate in 1870 to the effect that the United States should propose "to England and Canada that they shall assent to a public expression by the inhabitants of the Selkirk or Winnipeg district, sometimes called Central British America, and also, if you please, by the inhabitants of British Columbia, on the question of union with the Canadian confederation or with the United States."¹³ Senator Jacob Howard of Michigan and Senator Henry W. Corbett of Oregon expressed interest in annexing British Columbia and/or additional areas as partial settlement of the *Alabama* claims.¹⁴ Zachariah Chandler of Michigan, another Senate expansionist, argued for settlement of the *Alabama* claims by forcing England to cede all of Canada to the United States. As late as 1874

¹¹ Riel's explanation of his plan is included in Bowsfield, "Louis Riel's Letter to President Grant, 1875."

¹² Martin Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly: The Portrait of a Politician* (Chicago, 1962), 127.

¹³ *Congressional Globe*, 41 Cong., 2 Sess., 933.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 324-26.

Chandler was instrumental in defeating free trade with Canada because he looked forward to the political union of the two nations to bring about "the complete consummation in the independence of the whole English-speaking race on the American continent."¹⁵

If Riel had considered annexation, he could also have found assistance from railroad interests in the United States. Both Jay Cooke's Northern Pacific and George Becker's Saint Paul and Pacific were interested in acquiring northern routes to the west coast before the Panic of 1873 forced them into bankruptcy.¹⁶ At no point did Riel contact any of these extreme Manifest Destinarians to gain their support; instead, he severely criticized then openly broke with follower William Donoghue who tried to negotiate with annexation and Fenian interests in the United States. There were some in the Red River settlement who desired annexation. The United States consul in Winnipeg, James W. Taylor, and his countryman, Enos Stutsman, tried to capitalize on such sentiment, but Riel made clear time after time that his intention was to create a government that would be loyal to Her Majesty and that would negotiate Manitoba's entry into Confederation. There is no reason to suppose that his views on that issue had changed by 1875 when he wrote to Morton. Additionally, there is nothing in Morton's record to connect the senator with the avid annexationists in Congress despite the charges of Sumner during the Santo Domingo debates that Morton's proposal to send a commission to investigate the Santo Domingo situation was a disguised step toward annexation.¹⁷ An undated speech among the sparse Morton papers indicates that Morton strongly favored complete independence for Canada after the negotiations for the Treaty of Washington in 1871. He held open future possibility of annexation only if both Canada and the United States felt it to be desirable.¹⁸ Part of Riel's thinking in making an appeal to Morton rather than to the annexationists may

¹⁵ Quoted in Mary Karl George, *Zachariah Chandler: A Political Biography* (East Lansing, Mich., 1969), 215.

¹⁶ Although Jay Cooke's and George Becker's lines were bankrupt after the Panic of 1873, successors retained an interest in western expansion. James J. Hill, Canadian by birth, bought out Becker's interests and ran a line to Winnipeg before connecting to the coast. John F. Stover, *American Railroads* (Chicago, 1961), 76-79.

¹⁷ George, *Zachariah Chandler*, 185.

¹⁸ Undated speech draft, Box 4, Oliver P. Morton Papers (Indiana Division, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis).

therefore have been that the senator would not be likely to couple any agreement to demands for annexation.

Support for Riel's Manitoba uprising existed among the American population, but most of it was unacceptable to the Métis leader. Riel received letters from Cleveland, Ohio, expressing a willingness on the part of the writers to emigrate and fight for his cause, especially if he were to issue a true Declaration of Independence and, possibly, later agree to annexation.¹⁹ Letters from Buffalo, New York, assured Riel that Americans and Fenians could be secured to assist in a continuing rebellion and suggested military strategies for use against the British regulars.²⁰ These, however, did not represent the kind of help which Riel needed or wanted. The Métis leader had visited widely among New England francophones, many of whom were natives of French Canada. His close friend, Edmond Mallet, wrote from his parents' home in New York that he had met friends of Riel during a lecture tour (in French) to Worcester, Massachusetts.²¹ Despite the fact that these friends and advisors might have been an influential constituency had Riel approached their congressmen rather than Morton, there is no indication that he did so.

Morton was evidently the mainstay of Riel's hope for assistance from the United States government, for the Métis leader wrote to the senator again the day following his original letter. In a note dated November 1, 1875, Riel suggested that in return for Morton's assistance, he would effect a cure for the paralysis which had severely limited Morton's physical mobility since 1865.²² Unfortunately, no extant evidence exists to indicate any reaction by the senator to this extraordinary offer. Riel's biographer, Thomas Flanagan, cites Morton as "an atheist since youth" and therefore unreceptive to Riel's offer.²³ Morton's contemporaries did not class the senator as an atheist, although he lacked any formal link with an organized religious body. The major biographical work on Morton describes him as a "Channing Unitarian" with a "great reverence for the name of God" which he "seldom used lightly."²⁴ A congressional col-

¹⁹ John Holland to Louis Riel, December 28, 1869, and illegible author to Louis Riel, January 7, 1870, Riel Collection, numbers 16, 18.

²⁰ Charles Beardsley to Riel, April 30, 1870, June 24, 1870, Riel Collection, numbers 28, 30.

²¹ Edmond Mallet to Riel, October 22, 1875, Riel Collection, number 315.

²² Thomas Flanagan, *Louis 'David' Riel: 'Prophet of the New World'* (Toronto, 1979), 47.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ William Dudley Foulke, *Life of Oliver P. Morton: Including His Important Speeches* (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1899), II, 532.

league remembered a conversation with Morton in which the senator had "expressed his faith in immortality and the Christian system." The same colleague described Morton's religious attitude further: "He seemed not to regard the ceremonial of religion, but believed in a religion of feeling, of works, rather than of opinion."²⁵ Since scholars agree that one of the strongest influences on Riel's character was the unique brand of Roman Catholicism that nurtured and was nurtured by the French Canadians in a sense of "divine mission" after the Conquest of 1760, it would seem that Riel should have anticipated problems in dealing with a person who may well have believed that no God existed. On the other hand, Riel could reasonably have related to a "Channing Unitarian." Biographer William Dudley Foulke credits Morton with a study of works by William Paley during Miami University years.²⁶ Paley's natural theology philosophies were influential in Canada during the early nineteenth century and would have been familiar, if unacceptable, to Riel in Quebec.²⁷

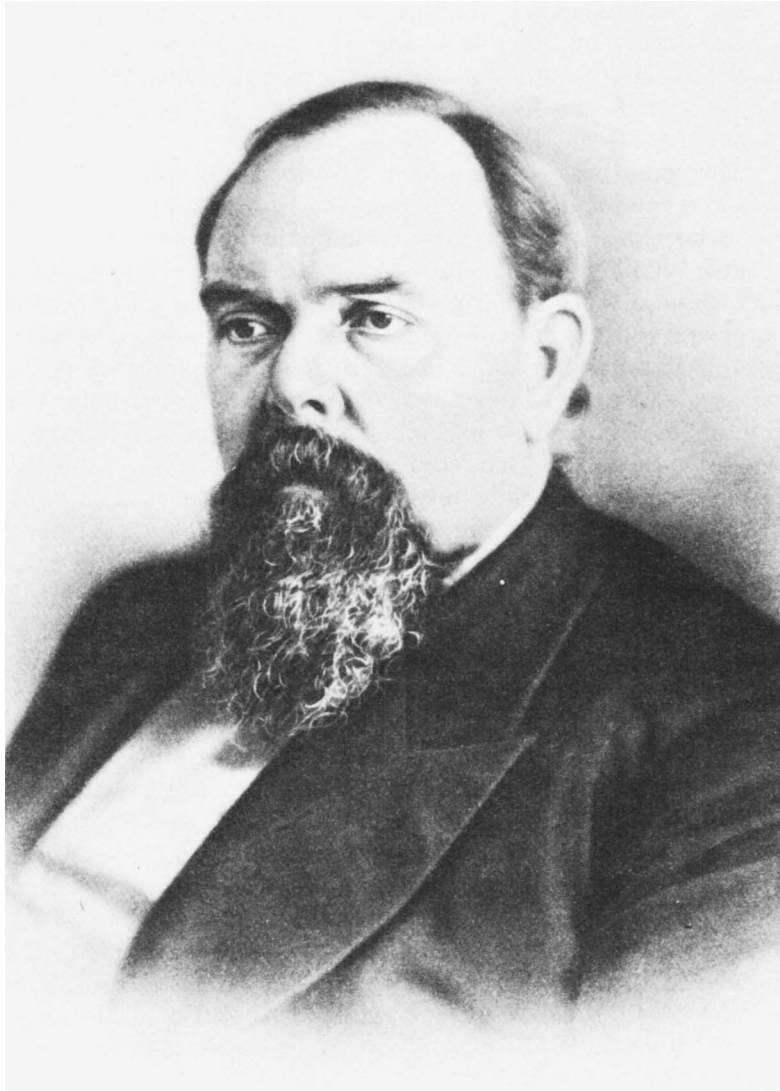
Although Flanagan probably erred in his religious assessment of Morton, his studies have shed much new light on the religious aspects of Riel's life. Some of Riel's later actions were so ludicrous as to seem bizarre. Flanagan, however, has painstakingly and convincingly shown that in all the instability and confusion that surrounded Riel's political and religious leadership, no action was illogical or inconsistent by the Métis leader's own standards.²⁸ All modern studies show that it has been a mistake to portray Riel as a fanatic egotist leading superstitious and misguided outcasts. To appreciate the religious influence and pressure that Riel felt, one must consider the influential role of the Roman Catholic church and clergy among French Canadians. From the time of the Conquest of 1760, the church hierarchy exercised growing power politically and socially, finally reaching the point of virtual control over all aspects of life in Quebec. The missionaries sent among the Indians and Métis expected, and were expected by the parish, to exercise similar power. The ultramontanist position of Quebec clergy, especially after the French revolution, caused them to be critical of what they regarded as papal compromise

²⁵ Address of Representative Thomas Browne of Indiana to the United States House of Representatives, January 18, 1878, in *Memorial Addresses*, 82.

²⁶ Foulke, *Life of Oliver P. Morton*, I, 12.

²⁷ A. B. McKillop, *A Disciplined Intelligence: Critical Inquiry and Canadian Thought in the Victorian Era* (Montreal, 1979), 59-91.

²⁸ Flanagan, *Louis 'David' Riel*, *passim*.



OLIVER P. MORTON

Reproduced from William Dudley Foulke, *Life of Oliver P. Morton: Including His Important Speeches* (2 vols., Indianapolis, 1899), I, frontispiece.

during the nineteenth century. All of these factors played a very real part in Riel's thinking. He expanded on each point, finally concluding that the entire papacy had served its purpose and that God now needed a new prophet in the New World, namely Louis—or "David"—Riel.

Unsympathetic writers have described Riel's actions as totally and completely mad from the very beginning. His champions, who claim that he has been denied a place in history because of his minority status, call attention to the fact that both friend and foe found it expedient at times to claim that he had been insane or was feigning insanity. Modern scholars agree that some emotional instability and symptoms of mental illness plagued Riel after 1875. A series of apparent delusions, which Riel regarded as divinely prophetic signs and messages directed to him from God, occurred over several years time; and Riel gradually came to believe that he was to be, in addition to a political leader, the new religious leader of a post-papal Catholic church and would replace the Bishop of Rome. He was to be the Prophet of the New World.²⁹ An integral part in convincing people of the validity of his divine mission, and in obtaining backing for his political dreams at the same time, was to be the resurrection of Oliver P. Morton!

Riel had many "signs" from God that he would obtain help from Morton. One, in March, 1878, in Glens Fall, New York, consisted of a vision of the American eagle smiling benignly toward the Northwest. At the same time God spoke to him of "Oliver 'Pie' Mort-tonne." Riel placed great stock in searching for meanings of French to English (and vice versa) translations and in this instance was using the French for Pius in lieu of Morton's middle initial. In addition, he separated Morton's last name into two French words which could translate as "dead thunder."³⁰ Riel also found it significant that Morton had died on November 1, 1877—exactly two years to the day after Riel had written to offer to heal his infirmity. In snatches of diaries written by Riel after his return from Montana to Saskatchewan territory, Morton is included in a long series of petitions to God that were composed throughout the winter and spring of 1884-1885. Among the pleas for family members, trusted friends, his beloved Métis, and others, Riel wrote: "My God! If You wish, If You have so decided in Your eternal plans, resurrect Oliver P.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

Morton as he was and then heal him, so that he may aid us in the United States.”³¹ Riel intended for this aid to be given freely by the United States. Apparently Morton would know how and by whom his resurrection and cure had been arranged and would act accordingly, since Riel wrote in April, 1885: “Oh my God. Save me from the misfortunes of getting involved with the United States. Let the United States protect us indirectly, spontaneously through an act of Your Holy Providence, but not through any commitment or argument on our part.”³²

Morton was evidently unimpressed with Riel’s plans and promises. No evidence exists to indicate that the senator replied to Riel’s letters in 1875, and certainly Morton was not resurrected after death! The rational, practical, rather aloof senator may well have been taken aback by proposals of an impossible-sounding plan presented in such an intense manner by the emotional, dedicated, devout Riel. In his letter Riel suggests that his difficulties with the English language prevented Morton’s full understanding. Although French was his native tongue, Riel both wrote and spoke English well. Pronunciation and word usage may have hampered their communications, but Riel also acknowledged that Morton had objections to the plan which were sound.

During a traumatic period of his life, while seeking assistance with a highly implausible plan to assist the Métis people to form a state without danger of annexation to the United States, what might Riel have seen in Morton that caused him to view the senator as the very key to his success? Several speculative possibilities occur.

Since Riel knew Morton purely by reputation, he may have been impressed by the accounts of Morton’s wartime leadership of Indiana. The action of financing the state through personal loans and financial arrangements rather than calling a hostile legislature into session almost assuredly would have appeared magnificent to Riel. He would have admired the mind that devised the scheme of denying the legislative session a quorum, the character that could rely on friends and associates to provide the funds, and the courage that enabled the successful governor to run for reelection in 1864 in the hope that he

³¹ Thomas Flanagan, ed., *The Diaries of Louis Riel* (Edmonton, 1976), 32.

³² *Ibid.*, 78.

would be vindicated by a Republican-controlled legislature.³³ This was leadership of the sort Riel sought to give his Métis people: daring, incisive, brilliant—insuring the best interests of the common man even before such interests were recognized by the people.

That Morton could then rise to a position of leadership within the United States Senate would have satisfied Riel's view of the way the world should function. He, too, after leading the Red River Provisional Government and negotiating the entrance of Manitoba into the Confederation as a province under the Manitoba Act, had been vindicated by his people by being elected to the House of Commons. However, unlike Morton, he was not welcome in the seat of government and thus never took his seat.

During the post-Civil War decades the Republican party in the United States received much credit for freeing the slaves. In Canada the Métis had long been objects of discrimination on two counts of minority status: francophonic and half-breed. They viewed the freed black in the United States as holding a somewhat analogous position. As a leading Senate Republican after the war, Morton supported the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments to the Constitution. His role in their passage would probably have enhanced Riel's belief in the senator as a champion of the oppressed, even though Morton, as did other leaders of the time, denied that blacks were the "social" equal of whites.³⁴ In addition, Riel might well find in Morton's Senate speeches reasons to believe that the Indiana senator was ahead of the pack in favoring political rights for other minority groups. The extended debate over the admission of the Pembina, or Algonquin, territory in the first session of the Forty-third Congress was of interest to Riel since many Métis lived within the proposed boundaries. Morton's vote against admitting the territory was cast only after he had argued intently on May 28, 1874, for an amendment which would have granted full rights to all citizens—even women—in the territory.³⁵ Similarly, on February 13, 1875, Morton presented a petition

³³ For details on Morton's actions as governor of Indiana see Thornbrough, *Indiana in the Civil War Era, passim*; and Kenneth M. Stamp, *Indiana Politics during the Civil War (Indiana Historical Collections, Vol. XXXI, Indianapolis, 1949)*.

³⁴ Undated manuscript, Folder 17, Box 6, Morton Papers.

³⁵ *Congressional Record*, 43 Cong., 1 Sess., 4332-33.

that all citizens of the District of Columbia—including women—should be allowed to vote.³⁶

Morton also delivered an address to the Senate in February, 1870, on the "Laws of Neutrality." This speech supported Senate Bill 368, which forbade United States citizens to provide arms for "any foreign prince or State to commit hostilities against the people of any province, district, or colony who are in a state of armed insurrection against such foreign prince or State."³⁷ Morton's speech was actually directed at Spain and Cuba, but he made mention of Canada at several points as an area which, should it seek to separate from England, would find no English objection. Morton also distinguished between a rebellion within a nation, such as the Union had rightly put down, and rebellion of distant provinces seeking independence, which should be allowed to proceed without interference.³⁸ In Riel's mind the Manitoba uprising would certainly have fallen even beyond the latter category. The Red River area was not a part of Canada when the people resisted in 1869. The Northwest Territory was, by definition, not yet a province when the rebellion took place in 1884-1885. By Riel's reasoning, therefore, Morton would surely approve and support his undertaking.

Riel might also have admired what he knew of Morton's personal life. According to contemporaries the invalid senator was devoted to his family and admired in return by them.³⁹ Although Riel had not yet married at the time of his contact with Morton, his own feelings for family ties and relationships were always in keeping with the strongest French Catholic traditions. Morton's rise from an orphaned childhood through law study to an influential position in the Republican party—which Riel quite possibly viewed as an ideological political organization—might also have impressed the Métis leader. The decision that took Morton from the ranks of the Democratic party into the local People's group and on to Pittsburgh as an early member of the national Republican party could well have appealed to Riel as courageously following one's conscience even at the possible cost of position. Morton's willingness to allow Henry S. Lane to lead the Republican ticket in Indiana as the gubernatorial nominee in 1860 when Morton himself had

³⁶ *Congressional Record*, 43 Cong., 2 Sess., 1267.

³⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 41 Cong., 2 Sess., 1128.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1131.

³⁹ Address of Representative Morton C. Hunter of Indiana, p. 100, and Senator Ambrose Burnside of Rhode Island, p. 25, in *Memorial Addresses*.

been the nominee for governor in 1856 would have impressed Riel, particularly when allied with the fact that Morton rejected President Ulysses S. Grant's offer of the chief justiceship upon the death of Salmon P. Chase in 1873.⁴⁰ To Riel, Morton might well have embodied personal sacrifice in the best interests of the people.

Unlike many Canadians of both French and English descent, Riel had a firm understanding of, and appreciation for, the American political system. He apparently had no preconceived prejudice against the "republican" as opposed to a "monarchical" system. The accessibility of the American leaders to the public and the independence offered to each branch of government were to be used as a part of his plan. In his appeal to Grant, Riel suggested that aid given to the Métis cause would be of political value to the Republican party in general and to Grant in particular if he were to try for a third presidential term.⁴¹ The Métis was undoubtedly aware when he approached Morton that the Indiana senator was a possible contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 1876, and he might well have made the point regarding political capital to Morton also.

Riel's devotion to the Republican party, as opposed to the Democratic, never wavered. A few years after his meeting with Morton he angered American officials in Montana by trying to deliver Métis votes to the local Republican candidates during the 1882 campaign. The desire to be politically active was one motivation behind his acquiring United States citizenship in 1883. It may have been in part the disappointment of being rejected by the Republican leaders that caused Riel to write during his last spring in the area that would become Saskatchewan:

I used to live wretchedly in the United States among serpents, amid poisonous vipers. I was so surrounded that wherever I wished to set foot I saw them teeming. The ground was crawling with them. The United States are hell for an honest man. A respectable family is in disrepute there. It is ridiculed, scoffed at. Oh, what a great misfortune it is to be obliged to go seek refuge in the United States.⁴²

⁴⁰ For background on Morton see Foulke, *Life of Oliver P. Morton*, I, 35-45, 65-67, II, 339-40.

⁴¹ Bowsfield, "Louis Riel's Letter to President Grant," 67. Riel believed that the Métis vote plus that of other minority and immigrant groups would be attracted by aiding the Métis.

⁴² Flanagan, *Diaries*, 78.

Probably the most influential motivation in Riel's approach to Morton for assistance to the Métis people, however, was the Métis leader's mental state and emotional condition. If Flanagan is correct, Riel could subdue the violent rages that caused him to be institutionalized from 1876 to 1878 if he felt such restraint necessary to convince the disbelieving world that his claims of divine and prophetic mission were valid. A man who could exercise such control would presumably have little difficulty in believing that his plan to attain American assistance for a newly forming Métis state was sound and that the leader he thought Morton to be would prove a real and valuable ally. In his own mind Riel might easily have pictured Morton as the dynamic "war governor," a man who assumed a semidictatorial position when necessary for the best interests of his state and people, a man of humble origins who rose to a position of leadership in a political party formed on a commitment to free the downtrodden and oppressed, a man whose dedication to the righting of social wrongs had caused him to forego appointments to higher offices, and a loving and adored family man who courageously followed the call of duty despite the difficulties of invalidism. Surely this man could be made to appreciate the necessity and wisdom of Riel's plan. The personal-interview approach failed, in Riel's mind only due to the language barrier, but a man of Morton's character could undoubtedly be persuaded through a small miracle. Riel magnanimously offered to use his powers as a divinely inspired prophet to cure Morton of his affliction. Riel probably thought it understandable that Morton was reluctant to accept, but God brought a sign to the Métis leader when, exactly two years later, on All Saints' Day, 1877, Morton was removed from the earthly scene. Now, Oliver "Pie" Morton was truly the key to the success of Louis "David" Riel, his mission, his people, and his political plans. Through God's help the bodily resurrection of this American leader could be arranged. Then the Roman Catholic leaders, who had doubted and criticized his mission as heretical, would have to accept the truth of his visions and prophecies. Through their belief, all French Canadians—in Quebec, in the West, and in the United States as well—would understand and accept his leadership. Eventually the entire Catholic church would at last be corrected to conform with his vision. While all this was taking place, the last part of the Morton miracle would occur—the healing of the resurrected senator's paralytic invalidism. Out of gratitude, if not religious devotion, Morton and the American leaders would arrange the

protection and pressure which the Métis people needed to convince the Canadian and English governments to guarantee Métis rights under the British North American Act. The amount of United States assistance needed would depend, of course, upon how impressed the Anglican and Presbyterian English and Canadian leaders were by Riel's miracles. To Riel all of these assumptions might easily have appeared logical and valid.

The final tragic clash between the Métis and the Canadian government came at Batoche in May, 1885. Even then, Riel's leadership overruled the more brutal strategies of Gabriel Dumont, which would have been militarily more advantageous to the Métis. Rather than return to exile, Riel surrendered to the Canadian troops. His idealism, his devotion, his faith forced him to reject the idea of a defense based on insanity. The government charged him with high treason. The August trial was a sensation that could have no "good" long range results. When the six-man jury found Riel guilty as charged, they recommended leniency. Judge Hugh Richardson sentenced him to hang, and the sentence was carried out at Regina on November 16, 1885. The Macdonald government's stated reasons for execution were justifiable: the new Dominion must deal firmly with the threat of rebellion. As a part of the Empire, British law would be fairly extended to all.

Riel was hanged, and two Indian chiefs, Poundmaker and Big Bear, were found guilty on lesser charges and served prison sentences. These punishments were meant to prove for all time that rebellion would not be tolerated by Canada. To Riel's followers, and to their relatives in Quebec, it seemed that their leader was dying not because of his actions but because Ontario demanded that the execution of Thomas Scott be revenged. The issue remains an unresolved question between the two charter peoples even today.

Strangely, the very man to whom Riel had addressed a letter of supplication some ten years before his hanging seemingly held views similar to Prime Minister Macdonald's concerning the advisability of dealing firmly with rebellion within one's own nation. Had Morton still lived in 1885 (assumedly naturally rather than by Riel's intercessions) his attitude toward Riel's sentencing might have been disappointing to the Métis leader. On the other hand, if Morton had possessed all the character traits with which Riel possibly endowed him, if his dedication to relieving the struggle of minority groups was



A Group of Rebel Leaders by Octave Henri Julien
Beardy White Cap

Big Bear Louis Riel Gabriel Dumont

(Manitoba Archives)

Reproduced from Mary V. Jordan, *To Louis from your sister who loves you Sara Riel* (Toronto, 1974), 29.

as great as his biographers have proclaimed, and if his understanding of the Canadian situation was sufficient, he might have responded in Riel's behalf.

Perhaps some future discovery of additional Morton writings will provide another insight into this unusual situation. It seems likely that, at such a crucial time in the Reconstruction era, Morton paid scant attention to what may have seemed to him an unimportant episode between the half-breeds and the Ottawa government. It is improbable that he was even aware that these differences were, even then, threatening the anglophone-francophone relations in Canada. It is evident, however, that Oliver Perry Morton, usually depicted as an anathema to rebels in the United States, was a very real focus of the hopes and dreams of Canada's most renowned rebel, Louis Riel.