

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association

Prologue to the Red River Resistance: Pre-liminal Politics and the Triumph of Riel

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Volume 5, Number 1, 1994

URI: id.erudit.org/iderudit/031075ar
<https://doi.org/10.7202/031075ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN 0847-4478 (print)
1712-6274 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ens, G. (1994). Prologue to the Red River Resistance: Pre-liminal Politics and the Triumph of Riel. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 5(1), 111–123. <https://doi.org/10.7202/031075ar>

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Prologue to the Red River Resistance: Pre-liminal Politics and the Triumph of Riel

GERHARD J. ENS

Résumé

This paper examines the early period of the Red River Resistance before Riel and his men erected a barrier at Rivière Sale to prevent the appointed Lieutenant Governor from entering the Colony. During this early phase of the conflict, two Métis leaders, William Dease and Louis Riel, were in competition to assume the leadership of the Métis cause. This power struggle involved two different paradigms of Métis rights as the basis on which to negotiate with the Canadian government. Dease, stressing Métis aboriginal rights, was eventually defeated by Riel who emphasized French and Catholic rights. The triumph of Riel, aided by the Catholic clergy in Red River, set the tone for the larger resistance to come, and significantly impeded Riel's attempt to build a consensus in the Colony.

* * * *

Cette communication porte sur les premières étapes du soulèvement de la Rivière Rouge, avant que Louis Riel et ses hommes n'érigent leur barricade sur la rivière Sale pour empêcher le Lieutenant-gouverneur d'entrer dans la colonie. Au cours des premiers moments du conflit, deux chefs, William Dease et Louis Riel, se disputèrent la direction de la cause des Métis. Cette lutte de pouvoir opposait deux conceptions des droits que les Métis auraient à invoquer dans leurs négociations avec le gouvernement canadien. Avec la défaite de Dease, l'idée des droits aboriginaux dut céder le pas à celle des droits des Francophones et des Catholiques, comme fondement exclusif du mouvement de résistance à venir. Cet abandon, encouragé par le clergé catholique de la Rivière Rouge, allait compromettre significativement tout effort de construction d'un consensus à l'intérieur de la colonie.

The Red River Resistance of 1869-70 is usually thought to have begun in October of 1869 with the stopping of the Canadian survey, the formation of the Métis "National Committee" led by Louis Riel, and the blockade of the road to Pembina. As well, most historians credit Riel with taking the initiative in formulating a Métis response to the Canadian plan to acquire Rupert's Land. What these accounts miss is the vibrant debate

The author would like to acknowledge and thank John Foster, Tom Flanagan, Gerald Friesen, Paul Chartrand, and Allen Ronaghan, who read an earlier draft of this paper and made a number of useful comments and suggestions.

and conflict within the Métis community about what their response to Confederation should be. The first coherent plan of assuring Métis rights was formulated in July 1869 and was opposed by Riel. It was not until Riel had defeated this first plan and its leaders that he assumed leadership of the movement against annexation.

It is this early “pre-liminal”¹ phase of the Red River Resistance — July through October 1869 — that this paper proposes to examine in some detail. During this period, two Métis groups, one led by William Dease and the other by Louis Riel, were locked in a power struggle. It was a struggle on a symbolic level in which the two sides offered different paradigms of Métis “communitas”² as the basis on which to present their case to the Canadian government. The struggle occurred at the grass roots level involving such tactics as negotiation and coalition formation. It was not until Riel had defeated William Dease for the leadership of the Resistance and consolidated his basis of support among the French Métis that he felt strong enough to initiate the breach of October 1869. The analysis offered here concentrates on the activities of individuals vying for power within very limited political settings, and is interested in how those who achieved power carried out the consciously-held goals of the group.

It is my contention that the initial Métis conflict between Dease and Riel not only set the tone for the larger Resistance to come but determined, to a large extent, the problems Riel and his faction would have in building a consensus in the Colony. To this end, the paper will explain the nature of this power struggle, the opposing paradigms of Métis communitas, the tactics Riel used to defeat his rivals, and the implications that this power struggle had for Métis unity in the Colony after October 1869.

The few historians who have examined this early period of the Red River Resistance in any detail have tended to denigrate the Métis that opposed Riel. W.L. Morton, in his extended introduction to Alexander Begg’s journal, tried to show that the true nature of the Resistance was revealed in the conflict between the Métis “half-articulated demand for corporate rights . . . and the intention of the Canadian authorities to grant individual

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1. This term is borrowed from the anthropologist Victor Turner who pioneered a processual approach to studying political conflict as social drama. From his study of symbol and ritual, Turner outlined a three or four stage process by which social dramas unfold. In this process, the first phase of a social drama was a period of “separation” or “breach” that Turner refers to as a pre-liminal phase. This phase is comprised of symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual (or group) from either an earlier fixed point in the social structure or from an established set of cultural conditions. This is a period when the norms that govern social relations between persons or groups within the same social system (village, chiefdom, university department) break down. Such a breach is signalled by an overt or deliberate non-fulfilment of some crucial norm governing the intercourse of the parties. See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, 1974), 13-42.
 2. This is a term that Turner uses to describe the bond uniting a people over and above any formal social bond.

rights in due course.”³ In his view, it was the “new nation” of the Métis which was “the central and dynamic protagonist of the Red River Resistance.”⁴ To make this argument Morton downplayed the role the Catholic clergy had in championing Riel’s leadership,⁵ and implied that those Métis opposed to Riel were dupes of the Canadians in Red River.⁶ To have accorded the Métis opponents of Riel some volition and legitimacy would have undercut his argument that Riel was the undisputed leader of the French Métis in Red River.

Philippe Mailhot’s account of the same period provides a much more accurate account of the role the Catholic clergy, especially that of Father Ritchot. Based on a detailed reconstruction of Ritchot’s journal, Mailhot details the active part he played in directing Riel’s Resistance.⁷ Mailhot’s account, however, closely follows Ritchot’s partisan perspective. While Mailhot does not completely endorse Ritchot’s argument that Dease’s actions were directed by John Christian Schultz,⁸ he does note that Dease’s proposals mirrored those of the Canadian Party,⁹ and that Dease and his party were not up to the task of directing the Resistance to annexation.¹⁰ What both Morton and Mailhot overlook are the antecedents to the Dease proposals, and the active role the Catholic clergy had in discrediting the Dease party.

The first major Métis response to the news of the impending transfer of Rupert’s Land to Canada came during the summer of 1869. In response to the vitriolic demonstrations of the Canadians in the Colony,¹¹ and in order to protect their land rights,

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3. W.L. Morton, Introduction to *Alexander Begg’s Red River Journal and other papers relative to the Red River Resistance of 1869-70* (Toronto, 1956), 3. Morton’s introduction runs from page one to 148. The section dealing with the events from June through October 1869 are found on pages 31 to 55.
 4. *Ibid*, 3
 5. *Ibid*, 50-51. Morton argues that some of clergy approved of Riel’s aims, but only followed the Métis and did not instigate or lead the Resistance. It is interesting to note that while Morton included one of Father Dugast’s letters of 1869 (29 August 1869) in his collection of documents, he left out the more interesting ones (those of 14, 24, and 31 August 1869) which deeply implicated Dugast and Ritchot in the actual planning of Riel’s campaign for the leadership of the Métis.
 6. *Ibid*, 33
 7. See Philippe R. Mailhot, “Ritchot’s Resistance: Abbé Noël Joseph Ritchot and the Creation and Transformation of Manitoba,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 1986), 14-62.
 8. Schultz had arrived in the Red River Settlement in 1861, and was the acknowledged leader of the Canadian faction openly advocating annexation to Canada.
 9. Philippe R. Mailhot, “Ritchot’s Resistance,” 21-22, 48
 10. *Ibid*, 29-30, 47
 11. Among other activities that were alarming the Métis, the Canadians were staking out land, they freely denounced the Americans, Fenians, and Métis in the Colony, they ran up the Canadian flag as if a symbol of conquest, and the Métis were openly and contemptuously spoken of as cowards. Hudson’s Bay Company Archives (HBCA), A12/45, William McTavish to W.G. Smith, 24 July 1869, fo. 269-70. HBCA, RG 1, Series 4/8, William McTavish to

a number of Métis called a large public meeting. This group included some of the traditional Métis leadership in the Colony such as William Dease, Pascal Breland, and William Hallet. Dease was the son of John W. Dease and Jenny Beignoit, and had been born in 1827 at Calling Lake. He settled at Red River and married Marguerite Genthon. The couple and their large family lived and farmed in both St. Vital and St. Norbert. By 1869 Dease was a prominent French-Métis trader and farmer, and member of the Council of Assiniboia. An indication of Dease's close connection to the various native communities around Red River was his fluency in French, English, Ojibwa, and Sioux.¹² Pascal Breland, a son-in-law of Cuthbert Grant, was a hunt and trading chief of numerous hibernant villages, the patriarch of St. François Xavier, and was also a member of the Council of Assiniboia in 1869. William Hallet was the most prominent English-Métis chief of the annual buffalo hunt with close family ties to numerous French-Métis families.¹³

These men placed an advertisement in the *Nor'Wester* inviting all Métis to meet at the Court House on 29 July 1869 to discuss what the Métis response should be to the proposed transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada.¹⁴ At this meeting, William Dease quickly took the initiative and advanced what might be termed an "Aboriginal Rights" paradigm for Métis rights.¹⁵ Dease called on the Métis to defend their rights to land in the Settlement, and disputed the validity of the Earl of Selkirk's purchase of the same from the Indians. The Métis, he said, should demand the £300,000 that Canada was about to pay to the Hudson's Bay Company. To this end the Métis should form a new government in the Colony to displace the HBC, and make their case to the Canadian government. While the first proposal elicited considerable support, the call to form a new government did not and the meeting broke up with no clear plan of action decided.

Historians have generally regarded this first initiative as a failure and attributed its lack of success to the notion that Dease and Hallet were dupes of John Christian Schultz and that their program too closely resembled that of the Canadians in the Settlement — perceptions which apparently put the Métis on guard and restrained them from supporting Dease and his proposals.¹⁶ However, this view is based on an entirely uncritical

Joseph Howe, 14 May 1870, 2

12. State Historical Society of North Dakota, A26, Albert E. Dease Papers.
13. Two of William Hallet's sisters married French Métis and converted to Catholicism.
14. *Nor'Wester*, 24 July 1869. It was later reported that Pascal Breland had not given permission to use his name on the invitation.
15. While no minutes exist for this meeting it can be reconstructed using the various accounts that do exist. See Archives de l'archevêché, Saint-Boniface (AASB), Dugast to Taché, 29 juillet 1869, T6695-6698; HBCA, A12/45, William McTavish to W.G. Smith, 10 August 1869, fos. 282-283; and Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), MG3 B14, M151, Ritchot's Narrative of the Resistance, volume 1.
16. George F.G. Stanley, *Louis Riel* (Toronto, 1963), 56-57. W.L. Morton, "Introduction," to *Alexander Begg's Red River Journal*, 32-34

acceptance of the comments of Fathers Dugast and Ritchot,¹⁷ both of whom were themselves not only steadfast partisans in the conflict but had also been the first to draw attention to the similarity between Dease's proposal and the Canadians' plans in order to undermine the former. The meeting of July 29, consequently, was not a failure, but merely the opening round of a debate that would continue until early October.

Looking at the history of the Red River Settlement in a little longer perspective, it is also clear that the Dease proposal, far from being inspired by Schultz's Canadian faction in Red River, was an aboriginal rights position designed by the traditional leadership of the Métis. Indeed, the Métis position as presented by Dease had been worked out nearly a decade earlier, in 1860, when it seemed likely that Red River would become a Crown Colony, a possibility which raised questions about Indian title, Hudson's Bay Company jurisdiction, and individual land rights in Red River.¹⁸

Debate over who had title began in 1860 when Peguis, the Saulteaux Chief, challenged the HBC claim to land in the Red River Settlement with the simple argument that the Indians had never sold it to Lord Selkirk and the Hudson's Bay Company.¹⁹ That prompted the Métis, under the chairmanship of Pascal Breland, to hold a large meeting at the Royal Hotel near Fort Garry to discuss their position. The most eminent Métis traders and hunters — William Dease, Urbain Delorme, Pierre Falcon, William Hallet, George Flett, and William McGillis — all spoke, and all agreed that, the treaty being one of friendship, not sale, the HBC had not received title to the Red River Settlement by treaty with Peguis in 1817. Indeed, it was their view that the Métis had a legitimate claim to the land and, moreover, that their claim should have priority; they were descendants of the Cree, the first residents of the area, while the Saulteaux had arrived in the Red River region only shortly before 1817. Accordingly, the meeting concluded with an agreement by all present that since no proper arrangements had been made with the Native tribes of the region and since the Métis were now on the land and the immediate representatives of the first tribes in the region, the Métis should use every legitimate means to advance their claim for consideration in any arrangement which the Imperial Government might see fit to make. The meeting then adjourned until May, when the various Indian chiefs and wintering Métis would be in the Colony.²⁰

17. AASB, Dugast to Taché, 29 juillet 1869, T6695-6698; PAM, MG3 B14, M151, Ritchot's Narrative of the Resistance, volume 1.

18. See "Red River a Crown Colony," *Nor'Wester*, 28 February 1860.

19. This debate can be followed in the pages of the *Nor'Wester*. See "Native Title to Indian Lands," 14 February 1860; "Peguis Refuted," 28 February 1860; "The Land Question," 14 March 1860; "The Political Condition of the Country," 28 April 1860; "Peguis Vindicated," 28 April 1860; "The Peguis Land Controversy," 14 May 1860; "The Land Question," 14 June 1860; "The Halfbreed Meeting," 28 June 1860; "Paketay-Hoond on the Land Question," 28 June 1860; "The Land Controversy," 28 June 1860; "The Last Half-Breed Meeting," 28 September 1860.

20. "The Land Question," *Nor'Wester*, 14 March 1860

This second gathering confirmed the conclusions of the first, and a statement was taken from André Trottier, one of three witnesses to the 1817 Selkirk Treaty, who swore that the Chiefs had not sold the land but only rented it to Selkirk for 20 years.²¹ The controversy died down when it became clear that Crown Colony status was not forthcoming, but it subsequently flared up again in 1861 when the HBC decided to exact payment for all lands occupied in the Colony at the rate of 7s 6d per acre. If this payment was not received, the HBC warned, these lands would be sold to the first purchaser, in which case all improvements would be lost to the present occupiers. While the threat was soon withdrawn, it provoked an indignant reaction in several parishes where the Métis reaffirmed that no monies would be paid, that the HBC had no right to the land (never having purchased it in the first place), and that it was the Métis themselves who had a very palpable right to it, being the “descendants of the original lords of the soil.”²² While arguably minor incidents, these indignation meetings illustrate that the traditional Métis leadership had worked out a theory of aboriginal rights as early as 1861 and were already using it to defend their land claims in Red River. It was a position that owed nothing to the Canadians in Red River, and it was this theory that Dease reiterated in July 1869.

Given Riel’s opposition to Dease and his party, it is important to delineate Riel’s paradigm of Métis *communitas* and the sources for it. That Riel should have assumed leadership of the Métis in 1869 is somewhat surprising. His father, who had been a leader of the free trade movement in 1849, was fondly remembered in Red River, but Louis Riel Jr. had no natural constituency among the Métis. He had left the Settlement at the age of thirteen in 1858 to attend school in Montreal and had only returned to the Colony in the summer of 1868. He did not farm; he did not participate in the buffalo hunt; he did not trade; and, on his return to Red River, he refused his friend Louis Schmidt’s suggestion to begin freighting to St. Paul. Indeed, from his return to Red River until he assumed leadership of the Resistance, it is not clear that Riel did very much of anything. The one report of his activities, albeit from an unsympathetic observer, George R. Winship, gives the impression that he was just an ordinary town loafer who lived entirely off his mother. Winship, who had arrived in Red River about the same time as Riel, also noted that Riel was never known to earn anything himself by manual labour, preferring to hang around saloons a good deal “waiting for something to turn up for him to do suitable to his tastes.”²³ Those historians who even bother to question why Riel rose to the leadership of the Métis usually point to his education as putting him naturally in the forefront. While this reasoning is plausible, it would not have carried much weight with the Métis buffalo hunters, merchant traders, or Métis councillors of Assiniboia.²⁴

In fact, Riel’s true constituency in 1869 was the Catholic Church, and it was through the Church that most of his influence would come. The most recent study of the Catholic Church’s role in the Resistance leaves off deciding whether Riel or Catholic priests

21. “The Land Question,” *Nor’Wester*, 14 June 1860

22. “Indignation Meetings,” *Nor’Wester*, 15 June 1861

23. PAM, MG 3 B15, George B. Winship Account of 1869-70 (typescript)

24. See for example Philippe Mailhot, “Ritchot’s Resistance,” 30.

directed the Resistance, but clearly proves that Father Dugast (the main teacher at the St. Boniface College) and Father Ritchot (the parish priest of St. Norbert) were close partners with Riel in deciding Métis strategy in 1869-70.²⁵ With Archbishop Taché out of the Settlement, Dugast and Ritchot took the lead in guiding their Métis flock. Both men were secular priests who had been born in Quebec and shared a French-Canadian nationalism that saw the French Métis sharing a common history, language and culture with the *canadiens*. Ritchot in particular felt very threatened by the recent arrivals from Canada and feared for the religious rights of the Métis.²⁶ Furthermore, both men condemned the traditional buffalo-hunting economy of the Métis, hoping to win them over to a settled agricultural way of life.²⁷ It is therefore not surprising that the two men distrusted the traditional Métis leadership and their aboriginal-rights justification for Resistance in 1869. For his part, Ritchot personally disliked William Dease (though Dease was a Catholic) and regarded him as a man “sans principe et aussi hignorant qu’orgueilleux.”²⁸ Father Dugast, meanwhile, criticized Dease’s aboriginal-rights justification of Resistance in a report to Taché, calling Dease a fool and adding that if the details of the assembly of July 29 were heard in Canada, the Métis would all be taken for a band of lunatics.²⁹

For Dugast and Ritchot, then, Riel most closely represented their ideal for the Métis of Red River. Attending the College of Montreal, he had been educated by the Sulpician fathers (who trained their students “as a Catholic and French-Canadian élite, proud of their difference from the English majority of North America”³⁰) and so was steeped in the twin tenets of patriotism and religion. As Riel wrote in 1874, “The French-Canadian Métis of the North (West) are a branch of the French-Canadian tree. They want to grow like that tree, with that tree; they never want to be separated from it, they want to suffer and rejoice with it.”³¹ Accordingly, it is easy to understand why Ritchot viewed Riel as a “jeune homme du pays (et de talent).”³²

With this paradigm of Métis *communitas* in mind, the events during and after the Assembly of July 29 become more explicable. Following Dease’s speech, John Bruce, who would later become the first president of Riel’s “National Committee,” took the floor and castigated Dease for advocating revolt. As a magistrate and member of the Council of Assiniboia, Dease should be the first to defend the government of the country, Bruce contended, and all such intrigues should be opposed. Apparently Bruce’s

25. Ibid, 31

26. A.G. Morice, *History of the Catholic Church in Western Canada*, Vol II (Toronto, 1910), 10

27. Philippe R. Mailhot, “Ritchot’s Resistance,” 9-10

28. PAM, Ritchot’s Narrative of the Resistance, volume 1, 16

29. ASSB, Dugast to Taché, 29 juillet 1869, T6695

30. Thomas Flanagan, *Louis “David” Riel: Prophet of the New World* (Toronto, 1979), 7

31. Louis Riel writing to the President of the Saint Jean-Baptiste Society of Montreal, 24 June 1874. Quoted in Thomas Flanagan, “The Political Thought of Louis Riel,” in A.S. Lussier (ed.) *Riel and the Métis: Riel Mini-Conference Papers* (Winnipeg, 1979), 140.

32. PAM, Ritchot’s Narrative of the Resistance, volume 1

arguments found their mark and the assembly broke up without endorsing Dease's plan of action. Father Dugast's lengthy report of this meeting makes it clear that Bruce had been carefully coached in his address.³³ Most of the evidence suggests that Ritchot, Dugast, and possibly Riel, had done the coaching and, indeed, Ritchot later admitted that he had advised his parishioners to be on their guard, and that he considered the object of the meeting to be of a dangerous character.³⁴ As well, both Ritchot and Dugast went out of their way to paint the Dease initiative as being inspired by John Christian Schultz.

Further meetings followed in August as the Métis continued to debate the position they should take to protect their rights considering the proposed transfer to Canada.³⁵ The Dease initiative, however, had collapsed by early October and with it the aboriginal-rights paradigm of Métis *communitas*. Writing later, Ritchot attributed the collapse of this early movement to a failure of leadership (the leaders being bought off by Canadian transportation contracts), to the Protestant clergy's interceding with the English Métis to accept the transfer, and to the greed of some French Métis merchants who saw Confederation as an economic opportunity.³⁶ While there was some truth to Ritchot's assessment, more important was the determined opposition of Riel, Ritchot, and Dugast, and their elaboration of another paradigm of Métis *communitas* that carried more emotional weight with the French Métis.

By the end of August, the French Métis had increasingly come to see Confederation as the annexation of Red River by Protestant Orange Ontario and, consequently, as a threat to their religious rights.³⁷ News that William McDougall would be the new governor of the territory only raised the fears of the French-Catholic clergy and the many French Métis who viewed him as one with the other Canadians in the Colony (John Schultz, Charles Mair, John Snow and J.S. Dennis), all of whom were widely distrusted.³⁸ Moreover, by this time there were also rumours circulating that McDougall was a "priest murderer."³⁹

33. AASB, Dugast to Taché, 29 juillet 1869, T6697

34. Canada. Parliament, House of Commons, *Sessional Papers*, 1874, No. VII, "Report of the Select Committee on the Causes of the Difficulties in the North West Territories in 1869-70," Appendix No. 6, Testimony of Noël Joseph Ritchot, 20 April 1874.

35. AASB, Dugast to Taché, 31 aout 1869, T6778-6780

36. PAM, Ritchot's narrative, Vol. 1

37. HBCA, A12/45, W. McTavish to W.G. Smith, 2 November 1869, fo. 313-314

38. This sentiment is clearly visible in the letters written by Father Dugast to Taché in the AASB. See his letters of 14 Aout 1869, T6734-37; 24 Aout 1869, T6764-67; and 31 Aout 1869, T6778-80.

39. HBCA, RG 1, Series 4/8, W. McTavish to Joseph Howe, 14 May 1870, 13. The basis of this rumour had to do with McDougall's role in the Manitoulin Island Incident of 1862-63 in Canada. For an explanation of this incident and its bearing on McDougall's reputation among the Métis see Neil Edgar Allen Ronaghan, "The Archibald Administration in Manitoba, 1870-1872" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Manitoba, 1987), 61-85.

Dugast, writing to Taché, recounted a conversation between the Métis and John Snow that clearly showed the mindset of the time. Snow, who had been sent from Canada to build a road from Fort Garry to Lake of the Woods, tried to calm the fears of the Métis of Pointe-de-Chêne, but they would have none of it. They replied that he was friendly now that he was weak, but that they knew how the English had treated the Catholics of Upper Canada. “You are orangemen and you are all alike.”⁴⁰

How these sentiments and rumours were spread remains unclear, but these sentiments were undoubtedly shared by the Catholic clergy who, by October 1869, increasingly justified resistance to Canada in terms of protecting French and Catholic rights in Red River and who closely supported Riel, clearly the ascendent Métis leader. Thirty-five years later Dugast was to write:

In reality he [Ritchot] was the soul of the movement. It was he who launched it and without him the movement would not have taken place
It was M. Ritchot and I who not only guided but who drove on that opposition to the Canadian government — this is the real truth. I did not say it in my book because all truth is not suitable for publication. I say it to you. The ignorant métis would never have thought of vindicating their constitutional rights if M. Ritchot and I had not made them aware of them. Without M. Ritchot and me the movement remains inexplicable.⁴¹

With Dease’s initiative in disarray, and with the active support and encouragement of Ritchot and Dugast, Riel moved to take the lead. Along with Baptiste Tourond and a few other Métis, he stopped the Canadian survey on 11 October as it approached the river lots of the Parish of St. Vital, an action which, given the increasing fears and paranoia of the French Métis, won him considerable support. Then, when news arrived of the imminent arrival of McDougall in Pembina, Riel and his faction — which by this time included many of the younger and more militant boatmen of the Colony — took steps that would breach the established order, and initiate a period of crisis in the Red River Settlement. On October 20, Riel and his men met in the home of John Bruce where they organized a “National Committee” and made plans to stop McDougall from entering the Settlement. All was planned with the approval and knowledge of Ritchot.⁴² The next day “la barrière” was erected across the Pembina trail at St. Norbert, and all incoming and outgoing traffic was stopped and searched.

40. AASB, Dugast to Taché, 31 Aout 1869, T6781

41. Archives du Collège Sainte-Marie, Fonds-Immaculée-Conception, Dugast to Fr. Joseph Grenier, 15 April 1905. Quoted in W.L. Morton (ed.) *Alexander Begg’s Red River Journal*, 51n. Morton quotes this letter only to dismiss it as inaccurate citing as reasons that it was written 35 years after the fact, that Dugast possessed a flair for inaccuracy, and that Dugast was a vain and garrulous man. A close reading of Dugast’s correspondence written in 1869, along with Ritchot’s Narrative, suggests exactly the opposite.

42. See Ritchot’s narrative, Vol. 1. These events and Ritchot’s influence on them is described in some detail in Philippe Mailhot, “Ritchot’s Resistance,” 31-39.

This act overturned the status quo, directly challenged the Council of Assiniboia's legitimacy, and threw the Colony into an uproar. Already humiliated by the combined efforts of Riel, Ritchot, and Dugast, and aware that most Métis still did not agree with the precipitous and resolute action Riel and his men had taken, William Dease now took an uncompromising stand against Riel, arguing that McDougall should be permitted to enter the territory and hear the Métis complaints. Sensing that support for Riel's course of action was slipping, Ritchot called for an assembly of Métis to meet in St. Norbert on October 24 to resolve the divisions among the people. At this meeting, Dease and his supporters threatened to dismantle the barricade across the Pembina trail and only the intercession of Ritchot quieted the following uproar. Ritchot calmed the assembly by asking if they did not agree that Canada had treated the Colony with a lack of respect, and if it was not proper that some resistance be made. Even Dease's men could not disagree with this, and Ritchot eventually persuaded the majority of the Métis at the assembly to agree to back the path taken by Riel. Most of the rest agreed to stay neutral.⁴³ Dease, however, was not satisfied and continued his opposition.

The following day Riel was summoned before the Council of Assiniboia and asked to abandon his plans to prevent McDougall from entering the Colony. When Riel refused, the Council approached Dease and asked if he could raise enough French Métis to overturn the decision taken on October 24 and force Riel's men to disperse.⁴⁴ Dease moved quickly to raise a group of men to attend another meeting at St. Norbert on October 27, at which both sides repeated their arguments for or against Riel's strategy. While Ritchot later claimed that he had not taken a leading role, another account, almost surely based on intelligence supplied by Dease, noted that Ritchot had declared "in favour of the stand taken, and called upon the insurgents to maintain their ground."⁴⁵ Still another of Dease's party testified that Ritchot had "raved and tore his gown addressing the assemblage in the most frantic and excited manner."⁴⁶ The appeals of Ritchot and Riel

43. PAM, Ritchot's narrative, Vol. 1, 22-25

44. PAM, Minutes of the Council of Assiniboia, 25 October 1869

45. Canada. Parliament, House of Commons, *Sessional Papers* 1870, No. 12, "Correspondence and Papers Connected with Recent Occurrences in the North West Territories." Letter of J.S. Dennis to William McDougall, 27 October 1869. That Ritchot took an active role at this meeting is also backed up by Ritchot's subsequent actions during the Resistance. In December of 1869, after Riel and his men had seized Fort Garry, they began to run low on supplies and approached the Hudson's Bay Company for an advance. William McTavish, the presiding HBC officer, refused the request and told the Métis to leave the Fort. This caused a dilemma for the Métis Council and Riel. Their choices at this point were to either abandon the Resistance or forcibly seize HBC property. In the meeting held to decide their course of action, Ritchot took a prominent role advising the Métis to continue their course. Their case was already before the Canadian government, he argued, and soon the present ministry would fall and the demands of the Métis would be secured. With this encouragement the Métis decided not to disperse and the HBC stores and safe were broken into. See HBCA, A12/45, William McTavish to W.G. Smith, 11 December 1869, fos. 328-329.

46. Canada. Parliament, House of Commons, *Sessional Papers* 1870, No. 12, "Correspondence and Papers Connected with Recent Occurrences in the North West Territories."

together convinced even twenty of Dease's eighty supporters that Riel was right, Ritchot observing later (with an almost palpable disdain) that Dease had been supported by only George Racette, six Indians, and a handful of others.⁴⁷ Defeated, Dease and his supporters left the ground to Riel.

Riel had won. While Dease would continue to oppose Riel throughout the winter and spring of 1869-70, and other prominent French Métis would slide back and forth between neutrality and opposition, Riel never again lost the support of most of the French Métis. The Council of Assiniboia met for the last time on October 30, agreeing there was nothing more they could do.

Usually treated as a minor and almost inconsequential interlude, the Dease/Riel conflict played a major role in defining the nature of the Métis Resistance in 1869-70. On a symbolic level, it was a battle over whether the Resistance would be grounded broadly on a concept of Métis aboriginal rights and led by the traditional Métis leadership, or whether the Resistance would be more narrowly a defence of French and Catholic rights in the settlement and led by the young Riel. To be sure, the Resistance had many other facets not touched upon here, and there were other reasons (class, economic, familial, and generational) why many French Métis opposed Riel;⁴⁸ however, unless one understands the symbolic nature of the Dease/Riel conflict, one cannot understand how key participants understood the events in which they were involved. Those Métis leaders who had been upstaged by Riel, and sometimes badly mistreated,⁴⁹ were never able to accept his leadership.

Later in the Resistance, Riel tried to bridge the chasm that had developed between his followers and those of Dease, who continued to enjoy a good deal of support among the Métis in both Red River and in St. Joseph⁵⁰ and whose help Riel needed if he hoped to build a consensus around his leadership. Writing to Dease in St. Joseph, where he had sought refuge from Riel's men after they had surrounded his house, Riel pleaded with his opponent to join forces:

We have been in hostility till now, but I am certain it was not our intent to have bloodshed, among friends and relatives, or to strike terror or mourning in the lives of the Métis along the R.R

Mr. Dease when have I ever done you any harm. If just recently our soldiers surrounded your home, it was with the intention of bringing you here to accept our word of

47. PAM, Ritchot's Narrative, Vol. 1

48. See chapter five of Gerhard J. Ens, "Kinship, Ethnicity, Class and the Red River Métis," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alberta, 1989).

49. Many of the Métis who opposed Riel were later imprisoned by Riel including: William Dease, Baptiste Charette, William Gaddy, William Hallet, and Gabriel Lafoumaise. Hallet was kept in chains in an unheated room through the worst of the winter.

50. St. Joseph was a Métis community just across the U.S.A. border near the present-day town of Walhalla, North Dakota.

honour and assuring us that you would do all in your power to restore peace & public safety. . . . I beg you this favour, let us re-unite and join hands

Mr. Dease, I beg of you, why are you so opposed to us, after we have already discussed and aired these problems. My personal ambition is a thing not in my heart, and if I am capable of doing something it will be for the good of all. I do not ask for a reward, but only for that support and sustenance before all Métis.⁵¹

Dease, however, remained unmoved.

Riel also tried to broaden the scope of the Resistance after October 1869 to win over the support of the English Métis, but it never lost the French and Catholic tinge it had acquired in the period from July through September. This made it extremely difficult for Riel to build any settlement-wide consensus. After Riel and his men seized Upper Fort Garry in November of 1869, they raised a flag adorned with the fleur-de-lis and the Irish Shamrock. This ceremony was carried out by a Catholic priest who was attended by sixty of the scholars of the Roman Catholic seminary in St. Boniface.⁵² This symbolism was not lost on the English Métis. By allying himself so clearly with the Catholic clergy to defeat the Dease faction, Riel would never be acceptable as a leader to anything more than a small minority of English-Protestant Métis.

The Riel/Dease conflict also has some implications for the question of whether the Métis of 1869 were concerned with their aboriginal rights. Thomas Flanagan, in a useful study of the political thought of Louis Riel, has argued that the question of aboriginal rights played no role in the public debates of the 1869-70 Resistance. Riel's strategy in 1869, he argued, was to present the Métis as civilized men with rights equal to those of any British subject.⁵³

Riel wanted the Colony to enter Confederation as a Province with institutions modelled on those of Quebec: local control of land and natural resources, responsible government, a bilingual Governor, bilingualism in the legislature and courts, and a tax-supported system of Protestant and Catholic schools.⁵⁴

This is an accurate assessment of Riel's paradigm of Métis *communitas* in 1869. It does not, however, accurately describe competing paradigms that were part of the public debates on resistance before October 1869.

51. Louis Riel to William Dease, 15 February 1870. Reprinted in G.F.G. Stanley (general editor) *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel/ Les Ecrits Complets de Louis Riel*, Vol. 1 (Edmonton, 1985), 52

52. HBCA, A12/45, William McTavish to W.G. Smith, 11 December 1869, fos. 328-329

53. Thomas Flanagan, "The Political Thought of Louis Riel," 150-152. See also his "Political Theory of the Red River Resistance: The Declaration of December 8, 1869," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* XI: 1 (March 1978): 153-164; and "The Case Against Métis Aboriginal Rights," *Canadian Public Policy* IX: 3 (September 1983): 316-317.

54. *Ibid*, 139

PROLOGUE TO THE RED RIVER RESISTANCE

This paper has argued that the idea of Métis Resistance in 1869 did not spring from the brow of Riel alone and that, as early as July 1869, other Métis leaders such as William Dease had proposed another paradigm of resistance that was based on a theory of aboriginal rights. This aboriginal-rights paradigm, however, was opposed by Riel and his clerical advisors, Fathers Ritchot and Dugast, in their struggle to gain the leadership of the Métis Resistance. Their strategy consisted of stressing a defence of French and Catholic rights threatened by the Canadians in the Colony. With the triumph of Riel and defeat of Dease in the Assembly of October 27, the aboriginal-rights paradigm disappeared from public view in Red River. It is interesting to note, however, that once Riel was in control of the Resistance in Red River, Father Ritchot utilized an aboriginal rights argument to rationalize the Métis Children's land grant (section 31 of the Manitoba Act) in his negotiations with the Canadian Government in Ottawa in 1870.⁵⁵

55. For Ritchot's use of this argument see his Ottawa journal published in W.L. Morton (ed.) *Manitoba: The Birth of a Province* (Winnipeg, 1965), 140-142.