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Religion, Political Leadership, Charisma, and Mental Illness: The Strange Story of Louis Riel

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ABSTRACT: Louis Riel, a French Canadian half-breed, was hanged for high treason in 1885 in perhaps the most famous criminal case in Canadian history, with ramifications still felt today. Depending on one's ethnic orientation, he has been viewed as a madman, a saint, or a martyr. Despite evidence of mental illness, a defense of insanity was rejected. The Riel phenomenon illustrates the interaction of charisma, religiosity, political leadership, and mental illness and exemplifies a circumstance under which a mentally ill individual can be accepted as a political leader and prophet. This paper (1) reviews the history of the case (excluding the trial itself), analyses from psychiatrists published as early as 1887, and succeeding historical commentary; (2) documents the nature of Riel's mental illness; and (3) discusses the issue of the charismatic mentally ill leader.

KEYWORDS: psychiatry, mental illness, insanity defense, megalomania, charisma, religiosity, bipolar disorder, Canadian history, Riel

Psychiatrists use a simplified distinction between religious belief, exaltation, and fanaticism on the one hand and psychotic delusional thinking involving religiosity on the other. Maintaining this separation is often difficult and the overlap can cause great difficulties, both in unicultural and in multicultural societies. One criterion for guidance is the definition of delusion as a false fixed belief without a cultural basis—in other words, that the belief is culture-dystonic rather than culture-syntonic. More problematic are the occasions in which both elements are present—that is, some aspects of the delusions are culture-syntonic or, to put it differently, the mental illness is intermixed with socially acceptable religious exaltation.

In such cases, the belief system, even a most bizarre one, may be adopted by a significant number of people under the influence of the leader or prophet. For this to occur, the leader must have some other qualities to offset what may be perceived by those in the environment as unusual or peculiar expressions of thought. Correspondingly, the social environment may be such as to allow mass acceptance by those exposed to the influence of such a leader. Another factor important in the social acceptance of a psychotic person is an unmeasurable quality, often called charisma, for which attributes such as unique powers of leadership, personal magic, and magnetic charm have been used as descriptive terms.

In recent times, few leaders have led religious or political movements or both while

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manifesting at times clear evidence of gross mental illness. As history has shown, such leaders can be dangerous to their own cause, their followers, and the society in which they live.

The story of Louis Riel is thus a unique one, familiar to Canadians but not to Americans. Riel is a historical figure who has grown in time, and strong feelings concerning him are expressed today by Canadians depending on their ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds. They know him as a saint, a madman, or a criminal. Fortunately, some information is available with which one can look at the psychiatric phenomenology of Louis Riel.

Historical Background

Louis Riel was born in 1844 in the Red River Colony in what is now Manitoba to a French-Canadian couple (Louis was $\frac{7}{8}$ French Canadian and $\frac{1}{8}$ aboriginal or native). His mother was extremely devout and had aspired to enter a religious order. In the early days of Canada, French Canadians had traveled great distances to the west as fur traders; many had liaisons with natives; and their descendants were and are still known as Métis. They became hunters and travelers, living off the country as did their relatives, the natives. They spoke both French and native dialects. The English Canadians who followed a similar pattern were called "half-breeds"—a linguistic equivalent to "Métis" (that word is also used by some to refer to both English and French half-breeds). As the west opened up, more traditional English-Scotch-Irish Canadians migrated in; thus four social groups evolved in close association with each other—natives, Métis, half-breeds, and British Canadians. The first three had little education and saw their way of life slowly being destroyed by the elimination of the buffalo herds, which was producing mass poverty and starvation in an area not yet part of Canada and with no formal government. Generally, the Métis were Catholic and the half-breeds Protestant (aside from the Irish).

This was the environment into which Louis was born—poor, marked by illiteracy, and on the edge of famine. Louis attended a church school, and recognizing his potential, the authorities sent him at age 14 to Montreal for schooling to become a priest. When he was 19 his father died; at some later time his schoolwork and behavior pattern deteriorated; he was deeply depressed and was advised not to write to his mother until he was in better control. A poem by Riel at that time included these words:

He wanders, lonely, his heart full of sadness. He suffers.
The emptiness in his heart is filled only with signs.
Alone with his sorrow, an exile from all pleasures.
In pain he lives out his days overflowing with bitterness.

Riel moved to a convent, frequently cut classes, and at times did not return at night. Some time in 1865 he thought he was a French Jew from Marseilles named David Mordecai, who had been substituted for the real Louis Riel, who had drowned.

In March of the same year, a few months before completion of his studies, he quit school. He lived with relatives, spoke of business deals (getting a large sum of money to invest in furs), tried clerking to be a lawyer, and in 1866 returned to the Red River Colony.

By 1869 he had become secretary of the National Committee of the Red River (and the real leader of the Métis). He issued an order denying entry into the area of a governor appointed by Canada, seeking negotiation and clarification of the rights and land claims of the original settlers. Riel formed a Provisional Government of "Assiniboia" (November 1869), seized a fort, and was ultimately elected president. While he had taken over the territory with little serious conflict, in March 1870 he authorized the execution of an anglais, Thomas Scott, who had opposed him (this act resulted in Riel's expulsion from

Canada for five years). At one point he became quite ill and for several weeks his survival was in doubt (the nature of this illness is not known). He formed a government and sent delegates to Ottawa to negotiate the founding of a province.

Ultimately the Canadian Government did create a new province of Manitoba with a number of land agreements, but Riel himself was not granted amnesty. He fled in 1870; the next year a \$5000 reward for him was offered. As a fugitive he feared assassination. Nonetheless, in 1872 he ran for Parliament, and withdrew in favor of a prominent Quebecker. On this man's death he was nominated by acclamation for a by-election in 1873 and was elected again to the national House of Commons in 1874. During this time, with a warrant out for his arrest, he surreptitiously slipped into Ottawa and signed the registry as a member of Parliament, from which he was expelled the following month.

Riel later wrote of an episode in December 1874 near Mt. Vernon in Virginia when

The same spirit who showed himself to Moses in the midst of the burning cloud appeared to me in the same manner. I was stupefied. I was confused. He said to me Rise up, Louis David Riel, you have a mission to fulfill! Stretching out my arms and bowing my head, I received his heavenly message.

Earlier the same month while in church, he was seized with such joy that he had to cover his face, shortly followed by depression and weeping. He went to visit a priest in Massachusetts where he proclaimed that he was a prophet. He spoke of regenerating the world and of being one of a trinity with Count de Chambord of France and Don Carlos of Spain. An uncle brought him back to Montreal where he would cry and bellow "like an ox."

After a period of improvement, he became violent and tore his clothes; he was taken to the Hospital of St. Jean-de-Dieu, where he was admitted in March 1876 under the name of Louis R. David. At times he declared that he had Jewish blood from his Indian ancestors. The staff feared suicide. In May 1876, he was transferred as Louis Laroche to the asylum at Beauport in the Quebec area. (The two pseudonyms were names given by the hospitals.) In both hospitals he was violent and destructive, struggled with guards, or ran naked through the halls. He was now "Louis David Riel, Prophet, Infallible Pontiff, and Priest-King." Canada was God's chosen country and French Canadians the chosen people. He accused his doctor at St. Jean-de-Dieu of trying to poison him. Thus, there is no question that he exhibited grandiosity and delusions of psychotic degree during this period. Gradually he improved and, when discharged in January 1878, was described as cured "more or less."

One priest wrote in 1870 that Riel wanted to establish an independent nation where he would be the "royal autocrat" with his own religion of which he would be pope and that all means to accomplish this would be justified.

Riel moved to the United States where he ultimately settled in Montana and married; he became a citizen of the United States in 1883 and was employed at a small mission school as a teacher.

In June 1884, the Métis of Saskatchewan invited him to lead them to presenting their grievances; this area was then called the Northwest Territories. The Indians, Métis, and half-breeds were threatened with problems over documentation for land ownership and land grabs by English settlers. The underprivileged in Saskatchewan had turned to the hero of Manitoba to guide them. They somewhat ignored his attempt to establish a church without a hierarchy and his claim to his leadership as prophet of the New World. As attempts at petition had little effect, talk of rebellion increased until, finally, in early 1885, Riel and his men took over churches as he announced the fall of Rome and the establishment of a provisional government. He declared the archbishop of Montreal to be the new pope. At one point, Riel, arguing with a half-breed, shouted:

You don't know what we're after—it is blood, blood, we want blood; it is a war of extermination, everybody that is against us is to be driven out of the country. There are two curses in this country—the Government and the Hudson's Bay Company.

Riel created an executive committee of "Exovedes" who constituted the Exovedate, the governing body. He created these words from the Latin referring to those picked from the flock. When the armed rebellion began with initial success, Riel was at the height of popularity. His forces had ambushed a police column and defeated the mighty Royal Canadian Mounted Police (then called the North-West Mounted Police). The members of the Exovedate adopted a resolution acknowledging him as a prophet under the safeguard of St. Joseph, patron of the half-breeds and the universal church. The resolution was almost unanimous (there was one exception).

Spurred by these developments the aboriginals, or natives, in the area attacked white settlements, more or less joining the Métis and some half-breeds in rebellion. Riel's diary at this point indicated euphoria to the point of incoherence.

At the same time that he encouraged those in the area to take arms against the Canadians, he overruled the actual military leaders of his guerilla forces in terms of strategy as he proclaimed that God's intervention would bring victory. He perceived the approaching Canadian army as the giant, as Goliath, and wrote:

I pray you to keep away the sons of evil. Take away from them the resources of life. Strike them with stupefaction. Stagger them when the fight takes place so that when they hear the thunder they will know the Almighty is preparing to inflict retribution upon them.

He went into battle carrying only a large cross; at one point he maintained a bodily posture in the form of a cross with two people holding his arms as he tired. In the midst of military chaos, he enacted Saturday as the Lord's Day instead of Sunday. Several days later he announced that he was the representative of the Holy Ghost to reform the Catholic Church. He also changed the names of the days of the week because of their pagan origins.

The military insurrection began in March 1885. By mid-May 1885, a small Canadian army arrived to squelch the rebellion. Riel surrendered to General Middleton, and his trial for high treason began in two months. In short order, he was found guilty, sentenced to death, and failed in appeals to the Queen's Bench and to the Privy Council in London. One major aspect of his defense was an insanity plea and several medical men, including Daniel Clark and Francois Roy, superintendent of Beauport, testified, as did a number of others. The forensic issues of the trial and analysis of the testimony as well as the subsequent medical review prior to execution will be presented in another paper. The data here have the purpose of documenting the characteristics, duration, and degree of mental illness of Louis Riel.

During this period, Riel wrote profusely. According to Stanley [1], he proposed to change the names of the planets and the stars. Among his revelations were these: Spain would come to the aid of the Northwest; Manitoba would be entirely French-Canadian; in 500 years there would be 40 million Métis; and Louis XIV had attained heaven after a prolonged period in hell.

Riel in his diary [2] related in detail visions and hallucinations—some dealing in incomprehensible fashion with a description of the moon and messages from God. The content is interesting but too long to include here. A prime focus was the replacement of geographic names by religious ones. The Lord thus ordered that the Atlantic Ocean would be "St. Paul," the Pacific "the Simon-Peter," Venus "Maria," Mercury "Anna," Mars "Julia," and so forth. The Galaxy was to be called the "Grey Sisters" for short. The sun would be "Jean." He declared the Indians of the northern part of the continent

are of Jewish origin. "The Indians of the south of this continent are Egyptians." He noted that this had been revealed to him in February 1876. Asia was to be "Xaveria," Africa "Zabulonia," and Europe "Napoleonia." Riel also reported that God revealed to him that Adam and Eve did not leave Purgatory until 8 Dec 1875. He also related the fate of various historical figures in their afterlives and indicated God's plan for the future. The Greater Pontificate of the New World would be in Montreal for 457 years and then move to Manitoba for 1876 years. These revelations were the last entries in his diary.

On 24 July 1885, Riel [3] wrote to Archbishop Taché from jail; in it he reviewed his background and religious evolution, indicated how the church in Rome has become profaned, and elaborated on his current beliefs. God had chosen Bishop Bourget as the new vicar on 8 Dec. 1875 and Taché was to be his successor (the "Pontiff of the New World"). The Papacy was to be moved to Montreal and then to St. Boniface (the birthplace of Riel). Canada was to take one-seventh of the Northwest; the rest would be set aside for a new Italy, a new Ireland, a new Bavaria, a new Poland, and so forth for Jews, Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes who would settle beyond the Rockies. The Catholic nations of Europe were to depart for the New World; the French Republic would be abandoned "to the evil spirit which torments it."

Riel addressed the court twice during the trial before the verdict and once after the verdict but before the sentence [4]. He spoke in English, beginning with a prayer for God to bless the court, the jury, his lawyers, and the crown lawyers. He spoke articulately, reviewing a history of 15 years during which time he had been blessed with a mission. He stated that he felt blessed when General Middleton and Captain Young testified that he was not mentally ill, because their words removed the "blot" on his reputation because he had been in a "lunatic asylum." "I have always believed that I was put in the asylum without reason." Further in the course of his monologue, his comments became somewhat diffuse and incomprehensible. He noted that others recognized him as a prophet and that he was a good prophet, not an evil prophet. He declined to talk of the partition of the lands. "I do not know if I am prepared to speak of it here because it would become public information, there is so much at stake that if I explained that theory Canada would not very long remain in quiet." He did not explain this enigmatic grandiose reference; he discussed how he "found" the word, *exovede*, and how he preferred to be simply one of the flock; in his next sentence he described himself as the prophet of the New World. Riel described the role of British civilization and government as irresponsible, and since the concept of irresponsibility is equated with insanity, it was British civilization that was insane. Parts of his oration were brilliantly and logically expressed:

If you take the plea of the defence that I am not responsible for my acts, acquit me completely since I have been quarreling with an insane and irresponsible Government. If you pronounce in favor of the Crown, which contends I am responsible, acquit me all the same. You are perfectly justified in declaring that having my reason and sound mind, I have acted reasonably and in self defence, while the government, my accuser, being irresponsible and consequently insane cannot but have acted wrong, and if high treason there is it must be on its side and not on my part.

Immediately after the verdict, Riel asked to speak again. He indicated that he was pleased that the jury had "cleared him" of the "stain of insanity." He reviewed in detail and accurately the history of the Red River Colony and that of Saskatchewan, which he felt to be its continuation. He then spoke of the land grant of 1 400 000 acres in Manitoba—one seventh of the land was to be distributed to half-breeds. If the half-breeds could not get the land, then he would invite the Italians, Irish, Bavarians, Poles, and Belgians of the United States, giving each one seventh. He would also invite Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians. He would also give the Jews one seventh if they acknowledged

Jesus as the Son of God. He would invite the Germans to make a new German-Indian world somewhere in North America as a last resort (“if I had not a verdict of guilty against me, I would have never said it”).

He then indicated how he had avoided presenting this in his previous address. On this occasion, the quality of thought was much looser and the reader (or listener) has some difficulty in following his thinking. He asked for a trial on his own career, not just the last episode, and for a medical commission so that he could demonstrate his sincerity in words, the meaning of which is not clear.

Canada during this period was in an uproar. The English Canadians demanded execution of the death penalty; the French Canadians clamored for pardon. The hostilities between Quebec and the rest of Canada were intensified, and so Macdonald, the prime minister, appointed a special commission to appease the French Canadians in his cabinet.

The commission of three doctors concluded that Riel could distinguish right from wrong on matters other than religion and politics, though there was some variation in their opinions. The cabinet, maintaining its French-English solidarity, declined to authorize clemency. According to Stanley, Prime Minister Macdonald cried, “He shall hang though every dog in Quebec barks in his favor.”

On the day before his execution, Riel was visited by one of the examining psychiatrists. He told the psychiatrist that while in Montana he had a vision in which an angel revealed to him that, like Christ, he would be raised on the third day after his death.

Other Comments in the Literature about Riel

Stanley [1] in his extensive biography commented, “French Canadians . . . were convinced that Riel was thoroughly insane, and they wondered why the jury ever convicted him. Since he had been convicted, and convicted by an English jury, the only explanation could be racial prejudice.” Howard [5], in his biography of Riel, felt that Riel had paranoid schizophrenia.

A vast literature has evolved about Riel in both French and English. This review was based on a number of books as well as a historical novel, medical discussions, and interactions with Canadians of different backgrounds who to this day are preoccupied with Louis Riel as saint, sinner, or madman. The focus is on data or excerpts dealing in a pertinent fashion with the mental state of Louis Riel.

Charlebois [6] reports Riel’s serious illness in February 1870; the diagnosis was “brain fever,” which he equates with encephalitis, adding further that it probably was a tuberculous abscess. While no other supportive documentation is available, the possibility of encephalitis raises another issue of organic brain disease. Charlebois reported also that Riel was seriously ill in February 1871 with a long lingering illness, “probably [the] result of months of responsibility, fatigue, and worry about his family, besides fear of his own safety.” He was described as weak, remaining at home, seldom moving about in public. One might speculate whether this represented a depressive episode. In 1874 when Riel sought a job as a United States government Indian agent, he was “shy, withdrawn, and rather uncommunicative”—in marked contrast to his usual personality. When Bishop Bourget gave him \$1000 several months later, he gave it to a beggar outside St. Patrick’s Cathedral in the United States, a striking act in view of his own penury.

Daniel Clark [7], medical superintendent at the Asylum for the Insane in Toronto, examined Riel three times in July 1885 and concluded that there was no malingering and that Riel had become increasingly deranged and “frenzied.” Clark asked for a postmortem study of the brain; he thought that organicity was involved; he contrasted the clinical picture of organicity with that of a “crank,” a condition with a “mental twist from childhood upwards.” He concluded:

Let us drop the name and person of Riel out of our thoughts and put in their place an algebraic symbol to equal an unknown mental condition of an equally unknown person. Let us then predicate of this symbol all that is known of this man's tragic, erratic and unaccountable history. Let all the facts be written in a medical certificate as reasons for putting this unknown person into an asylum. Let these recorded facts be closely scrutinized by legal and medical experts and properly authenticated, and there is not an asylum in Christendom but would commit him as a lunatic. In fact, there are few lunatics who have such a pronounced record of mental alienation and of periodic brain disease. In this way, we do not consider the sad mischief Riel has done, nor the cruelties of which he has been the instrument nor the grievous loss of life he has occasioned.

Clarke [8], in a two-part article, reviewed the Riel case in 1905 and concluded Riel was a victim of "judicial murder" as was Guiteau, the assassin of President Garfield. Clarke stated:

To the alienist the case presents nothing strange, and when one regards the unique social conditions surrounding this remarkable man, there is nothing more wonderful in the influence he exerted over the ignorant than by which poor insane Joan of Arc accomplished wonders in a brief period. Riel was simply a case of evolutionary insanity, which would in the modern school no doubt be classed as one of the paranoiac forms of dementia.

Clarke felt that Riel was a "mental weakling" who buckled under the stresses following his return to Canada, but who probably would have functioned in the "quiet" and "monotony of . . . hum-drum life" in Montana. After the battle of Duck Lake, Riel was a "maniacal paranoiac."

Ireland [9] reported Riel as stating, "I will commence by destroying Manitoba and then I will come to destroy the North-West and take possession of the North-West." His relative, Nolin (who was hostile to him) described Riel as living from 1 Jan. 1885 on a diet of blood cooked in milk. In May 1884, Riel pronounced his cure of his own heart disease by his own power. After his death sentence, Riel told Father André:

The great cause of sin in the world is the revolt of the body against the Spirit. It is because we do not chew our food enough and by this want of mastication, it communicates animal life only to the body; while by masticating and chewing it well, it spiritualizes the body."

At one point in talking to Father André, Riel held up his hand to André's view and said, "Do you see blood flowing in the veins; the telegraph is operating actively and I felt it; they are talking about me, and questioning authorities in Ottawa about me."

Anderson [10] provided details of Riel's belief that he was a Jew, David Mordecai, and that Riel had been drowned in the Missouri. He was the new Messiah and tried to establish a new church.

A professor of history, Knox [11], provided other material of interest. She questioned the then superintendent of St. Jean-de-Dieu, Dr. Noel, who reviewed the hospital records and reported that Riel had "delusions of grandeur" which would in 1951 be called "depressive mania." He was discharged with slight improvement. In that article is the striking note that Lavell, who examined Riel prior to his execution, originally wrote to Prime Minister Macdonald that Riel was "not an accountable being," but these words were stricken from the printed report of the Insanity Commission that found Riel sane. Knox concluded that Riel was not insane in 1885—"The injustice was not that an insane man went to the scaffold, but that a sincere man with a just cause was hanged for the mistakes of others."

Markson [12] in his 1965 analysis concluded that Riel had a psychosis with predominantly manic and paranoid features. He used the term "megalomania" and felt that Riel's case resembled Freud's famous discussion of Schreber. He also noted that such factors as constitutional ones or the possibility of neurosyphilis cannot now be adequately eval-

uated; he did focus on psychodynamic factors possibly operant in Riel's functioning. In his review of the psychiatric participation at the trial and at the subsequent review, Greenland [13] noted problems in the medical reviews that were used at that time. Turner [14], in the same symposium, reviewed the application of the legal rules to the case. The jury had, though finding Riel guilty, recommended mercy. Turner quotes the newspaper, *The Mail*, which commented that the jury thus indicated their opinion that Riel was not wholly sane: "They are satisfied that he knows the difference between right and wrong but believe him to be subject to delusions which warped his moral sense." Littmann [15] in his review of the case of Louis Riel discussed the various medical reports and the various diagnostic possibilities, concluding that Riel fit the "grandiose sub-type of paranoid schizophrenia."

Flanagan [16] noted that every psychiatrist who has written on Riel's case concluded that he was non compos mentis in 1885, though Flanagan felt that Riel had been unjustifiably committed in 1876, criticizing in particular the use of false names and the lack of a second signature. Flanagan felt that Riel was a religious enthusiast with eccentric ideas but was not dangerous to himself or others in 1876.

Discussion

Thus far, I have summarized much of the historical data about Louis Riel, focusing on the words of Riel himself and the observations of contemporaries. This review provides a fair sampling of the abnormal behavior and thought of Riel, though it is not all-encompassing. Nor does this presentation reflect adequately the positive features that characterized him. Riel was learned in at least three academic languages (French, English, Latin) and was fluent in Indian tongues. He was intelligent, articulate, sincere, committed to a number of causes—religion, the French Canadians, the Métis, the underprivileged, and the dispossessed—and he was certainly devoted to the property rights, civil rights, and political rights of those whom he championed.

A variety of opinions regarding Riel's mental state have been given—from those who considered him mentally ill to those who considered him "sane" but a victim of outside forces. Some of his proponents acknowledge his mental disorder, some only that he had emotional difficulties but not of significant degree in 1885. Others imply that he was railroaded (which, to a degree, he was) and that the accusations of insanity tend to diminish his stature and therefore he must be defended against such an implication (Riel himself took this stance).

Some grant mental disturbance but attribute it to the stress caused by others—particularly the English Canadian power brokers.

The medical men of the time offered somewhat varying opinions but generally agreed that he had some degree of insanity (to use the term of the times). The details of the evaluations relating to his trial will not be presented here, since the trial, subsequent special commission, and the sociolegal and political environment require a separate exposition.

Words such as megalomania, grandiosity, delusions, hallucinations, and paranoia were used at the time or contemporaneously to describe Riel. The issue of organicity was also raised, two specific possibilities being general paralysis of the insane (as that form of syphilis was then called) or, later, tuberculous encephalitis or abscess. The lack of an indication of chronic organic deficit, the cyclic aspects, the absence of progression, and the longstanding and periodic nature of the disorder make organic brain disease unlikely. The use of the term "paranoiac dementia" is in keeping with the early use of the word "dementia," as in the terminology for schizophrenia, previously popularized as "dementia praecox."

Various definitions of psychosis exist. One set of definitions deals with a break from reality, the concept that thinking processes are so far divorced from the facts of the surrounding world as to constitute a gross deviation from almost any concept of normalcy. A second definition deals with the presence of delusional and hallucinatory ideation. By either standard, Riel was periodically psychotic.

How would he be categorized in the light of current concepts? The history indicates gross psychotic behavior from about age 20 or 21. He had a depression which interfered with functioning and resulted in his not completing his education, followed by a period of overactivity and grandiosity. At 21 (1865) he exhibited bizarre delusional thinking; he was not Louis Riel at all but David Mordecai, a Jew from Marseilles. His adjustment from that time varied.

He did do important work in the 1869–1870 period on behalf of the Métis and others in the Red River area and can legitimately be called the father of Manitoba. However, he may have had depressions in 1870 and 1871, and he did have unexplained periods of nonfunctioning attributed to vaguely defined fatigue or brain fever. In 1874 he had an apparent manic episode with grandiosity, visions, and bizarre ideation. He was hospitalized for almost two years in the 1876–1878 period, with marked bizarreness and violent and destructive behavior amid suicidal concerns. Little is known of his period in rural Montana prior to his being invited to be a spokesperson for the Métis in Saskatchewan. His behavior during this period has been described by a number of people, some of whom were not his followers or were, in fact, in opposition to his religious or political preoccupations and acts.

His own words, both in his diary and in his letters, adequately reflect the unique nature of his thinking processes, which were of a degree that went beyond mild preoccupation or exaggeration of current religious beliefs. The extreme grandiosity, his perception of his own importance and exalted status, his attempts to found a government and a church, all fit a description of megalomania, however defined. His looseness of thought and expressions of grandeur were well manifested in his speech to the court after his conviction.

Riel thus had a number of manic episodes with mood-syntonic delusions that were basically culture-discrepant, though some fit in with his cultural background and the times in which he lived. His manic episodes were very marked. As has frequently been observed, mania not only is often not recognized but it has an infectious, believable quality, more so than depression or the more pure forms of schizophrenia. Riel did not show the chronicity of disorganization of thought of schizophrenia though some might use the term “schizoaffective disorder” to describe his condition. However, the psychotic episodes seem to have coincided with manic periods.

There is also a history of depressions or possible depressions of mild to moderate degree—in conformance with a cyclic or circular disorder. It may be that his social acceptance may have allowed the manic episodes to predominate. Finally, people with bipolar disorder often function quite well between episodes.

To sum up, based on the data reviewed here, I believe that Riel today would probably be diagnosed as having a bipolar disorder, primarily manic. The degree of symptomatology certainly exceeds the limits of the relatively mild mood swings of the cyclothymic personality. The long history and the current understanding of bipolar disorder as being endogenously biochemically determined tend to negate the possibility that his condition was a stress reaction caused by his political enemies—a concept that is psychiatrically weak. The element of paranoia is not simple, as it is clear that numerous people opposed him and were indeed “out to get him.” On the other hand, some of this oppositional behavior could be related to his own acts. In any event, that element is a minor feature of the overall picture.

Why did the Métis and his other followers endorse such a person? The Métis, half-breeds, and aboriginals were an uneducated, illiterate group in the main. The Métis were

few in number, but they had adapted to a unique way of life that was threatened by the influx of settlers, who were able to use the government and the legal system to obtain title to lands that the local people needed to survive. They had good reason to detest the Canadian government, and the Red River experience ultimately turned out disastrously, as many sold their land rights for pittance. Many Métis had indeed migrated from Manitoba. Riel at that time was perceived as a heroic figure who had brought about change, though his own behavior in ordering the killing of Scott in 1879 precluded a possible career in government. Riel was a striking, messianic figure who could represent the underprivileged of Manitoba. A natural leader like Gabriel Dumont [17], who handled the military campaign brilliantly, was handicapped by his illiteracy and lack of facility in English; he was a practical, down-to-earth man, widely accepted by his peers. Riel's magnetism was reflected in his ability to form coalitions of disparate groups. He was generally respectful, did not preach a message of hate, and obtained little personal benefit. His request for \$100 000 from the Canadian government near the end of his career was apparently more of a manic self-estimation than an opportunity for personal monetary aggrandizement. In fact, he usually lived in poverty. His followers had no sense of control over their lives; theirs was the cry of the dispossessed, the hungry, and the fearful. Such are the roots of those who would submit to a self-proclaimed and manic messiah. His mental instability or at least his history of mental disorder seemingly was not widely known; the priests who may have recognized the nature of his functioning were themselves part of the establishment that had failed.

Unfortunately, the revolt in Saskatchewan did not result in the betterment of the people, and there was little to show for the numbers of dead on both sides.

Louis Riel, martyr of the Northwest, died for his bad judgment. That bad judgment was at least partially determined by a mental disorder that today is often treatable. How he would have responded to lithium is an interesting question. He was also a product of his times and thus has become a symbol and an icon: today he lives on in the hearts of French Canadians of Quebec as a hero of French-Canadian culture, having fought a battle that still continues on the Plains of Abraham and the plains of the Northwest territories.

Though his cause had merit, the fact that such a severely ill person could mold a people is distressing, and one can only hope that in a world approaching the 21st century, knowledgeable and educated people will not subject themselves to modern-day charismatic Messiahs.

Postscript

Louis Riel, hanged for treason by the Canadian Government on 16 Nov. 1885, was honored by the issuance of a memorial stamp by the Canadian Postal Service in the early 1970s.

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