

Riel's Composition

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My friend Brad Mix, who is Métis from Manitoba now living in Tacoma Washington, showed me a photocopy of a manuscript that had been passed down to him by his mother, who was the granddaughter of Charles Sauvé (1859–1932). The Sauvé family had lived next door to the Riels in St. Vital and the two families had been close. In fact Charles Sauvé, along with Louis Lavallée, who had been married to Riel's sister Octavie, had been sent by the Métis National Committee to bring Riel's body back to St. Boniface after his execution in Regina on 16 November 1885. Sauvé had also likely been in Regina during Riel's trial for High Treason during the summer of 1885.

Brad was paying someone to translate this handwritten, 156-page poor-quality copy of Sauvé's notebook. The translator was having great difficulty and progress was slow. I immediately volunteered to help, and was able to complete the project fairly quickly, I think because I was familiar with the material and had experience working on handwritten Métis documents from that era.¹ This was an exciting document that I had not encountered in my visits to the Métis Historical Society archive in St. Boniface, where the original notebook has resided since being donated by a relative of Brad's in the 1990s.

Sauvé recorded in French the two lengthy speeches that Riel delivered in English at his trial. He also transcribed exhibits 7, 8, 10, 12, 15, and 16 as presented at the trial. After the trial-related material, there is a 64-line, 8-verse poem titled "Riel's Composition." I was aware that Riel had written poetry for most of his life. I was also aware that very little had been published while he was alive. After his death, other than two publications, one by his family in 1886² and a volume of juvenilia in 1977³—both in French—and a *Selected*⁴ in English translation in 1997 (all in paper by small presses) there was only *The Collected*

1 Gabriel Dumont, *Gabriel Dumont Speaks*, trans. Michael Barnholden, revised edition, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2009).

2 Louis David Riel, *Poésies religieuses et politiques*, (Montreal: 1886).

3 Louis David Riel, *Poésies de jeunesse*, (St. Boniface: Les Editions du Blé, 1977).

4 Louis David Riel, *Selected Poetry of Louis Riel*, trans. Paul Savoie, ed. Glen Campbell, (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1997).

Writings of Louis Riel, edited by historian G.F.G. Stanley, that could claim the sort of authority I was looking for. I wanted to see for myself, and in particular, I wanted to see how the book dealt with the poem I had just encountered.

In fact the poem “Riel’s Composition” that I translated for Brad Mix was not in the *Collected*, at least not the complete 64-line version. Twelve lines of a song with no title but the first line “Trois Corps Humains” appear as the last entry in the appendix. The text is of a song sung by Rosalie Poitras née Lagimodière, transcribed by Mgr. Antoine d’Eschambault, the president of the Société Historique de St. Boniface from 1933–1960. Rosalie Poitras learned the song from her husband Jean Marie, who had learned the song from his first wife, Louis Riel’s sister Henriette (1861–1891).

What follows is a careful transcription (including errors) of “Riel’s Composition” from Sauvé’s handwritten manuscript, accompanied by my translation.

Composition de Riel

1

Il faut rendre célèbre
Ce triste champs des morts,
Salut place funèbre
Où j’aperçois trois corps.
Ces disponibles mortelles
Feraient verser des pleurs
L’amentons-nous pour elles
Dans leur derniers malheurs.

2

En les voyant – j’éprouve
Une sentiment d’effroi
Un corps humain se trouve
Toujours le corps d’un roi
L’homme est roi par son âme
Et ses idées d’honneurs
Nous savons que la femme
Est reine par son coeur

Riel’s Composition

1

We must celebrate
These sad fields of death
Salute this funereal plot
Where I see three bodies
Those deathly remains
Make our tears flow
We cry for them
In their final agony

2

Seeing them I am stricken
With feelings of horror
The human body is
Always the body of a king
Man is king because of his soul
And his ideas of honour
We know that woman
Is queen because of her heart

3

Victimes de la guerre
 Je vous plains je vous vois
 C'est moi qui les enterre
 Au bout de trois longs mois
 Vous appeisez la rage
 La grande faim des loups
 Assez longtemps l'orage
 S'est abbatu sur vous.

4

Mille a su vous surprendre
 Mais vous en retraits
 Vous avez bien su rendre
 Le souffle en vous battant.
 Vous avez vu la poudre
 Eclater avec bruit
 Et comme un coup de foudre
 Se plonger dans la nuit.

5

Le bronze de batailles
 A déjà fuit hélas
 Pour vous des funérailles
 Il a donné vos glas
 Vous avez eu la gloire
 De mourir en guerriers
 Le jardin de l'histoire
 A pour vous des lauriers

3

Victims of the war
 I see you and I pity you
 It is I who bury them
 For three long months
 You survived their rage
 The great hunger of wolves
 Since the fury of the storm
 Came down upon you

4

You were surprised by thousands
 But you are in retreat
 You have done very well
 You are still breathing
 You have seen the gun powder
 Explode like thunder
 And like a cannon shot
 You plunge into the night

5

Those with battle medals
 Have already fled alas
 For you there are funerals
 Your death bell rings
 You have the glory
 Of the death of a warrior
 In the garden of history
 Your laurels await

6

Oh! que ma main est fière
 D'inhumir des héros
 Quand l'air frais la poussière
 Vient carreser leurs os
 Tu me prête ta bêche
 Jérôme pour ouvrir
 La terre dure et sèche
 don't il faut les couvrir.

La 7ieme marque

Nous sommes trois personnes
 Pour en enterrer trois
 Nos sympathies sont bonnes
 Et louables je crois
 Daniel Dumas, tu creuse
 Leurs fausses avec moi
 Mes pensées généreuses
 Doivent parler de toi.

8

Puisque ta femme Elise
 Vient t'aider jusqu'ici
 Il convient que je dise
 Un mot pour elle aussi
 Que la Bon Dieu vous fasse
 Ainsi qu'à moi Riel
 D'heureux jours et la grace
 De parvenir au ciel.

6

Oh let my hand be strong
 When I bury our heroes
 While the air cools
 Before their bones are dust
 Lend me your shovel
 Jerome to open
 The hard dry earth
 A final cover for them

The 7th part

We are three
 To bury three
 Our thoughts are good
 And honourable I believe
 Daniel Dumas you dig
 Their graves with me
 My thoughts are generous
 When I speak of you

8

Since your wife Elise
 Came to help you here
 It is right that I should say
 A word for her as well
 May the good lord give you
 As well as me Riel
 Happy days and grace
 When we reach heaven

It seems quite plausible that Henriette would have seen Sauvé's notes shortly before or shortly after her brother's execution, as she was involved in the publication of *Poesies: Religieuses et Politiques*, the posthumous publication of eight poems written by Louis "David" Riel. This 52-page, 15-cent chapbook was published by L'Etendard of Montreal in early 1886. The editor/publisher Abraham Guay included a note to explain that he felt that the certification and authorization of members of Riel's family was necessary to reassure the public of their authenticity. Riel's widowed mother Julie and widowed wife Marguerite, along with brothers Joseph and Alexandre, as well as sisters Octavie and Henriette, authenticated the engraving of Louis "David" Riel on 12 January 1886 in St. Vital and Riel's uncle John Lee did the same in Montreal on 24 February 1886. On a separate page Joseph and Alexandre certified that Guay was authorized to publish the book. On page 33 Joseph, Alexandre, and Henriette attested that the poem "Reconnaissance" on that page was written and composed by Riel. The final page of the book contains yet another statement by the brothers Joseph and Alexandre and the sisters Octavie and Henriette.

This is my translation of the song handed down through the Poitras family.

three dead bodies

three dead bodies

I found them in their last moments
lend me yr shovel Jerome if you would
the earth is hard and dry
but it must cover them

we are three who must bury these three others
our hearts are good and true I believe
Daniel Dumas you dig the dirt with me
Since yr wife has come to help us here
it is right that I should say a word for her
Man is king because of his soul and his code of honour
we know woman is queen because of her heart.
On the field of battle there are tears of sadness
I take my penknife and dip it in my blood
to write to my mother my good dear mother
when she receives this letter written in my blood

her soul will burst with tears her heart will stop
she will fall to the ground on her knees and say
“My children, pray for yr brother
 who has died with his regiment”
Death my most dear mother, each death in its turn
a brave death is the best death
we all must die one day

The last eleven lines are a departure from the Sauvé text and are taken from the preceding entry in the appendix, titled here “On the Field of Battle,” and elsewhere as “Riel’s Song” and “Riel’s Farewell.” The text is transcribed from a 1957 field recording of Joseph Gaspard Jeannotte, a Métis living in Lebreton Saskatchewan, done by Barbara Cass-Beggs. Father Rufin Turcotte did the transcription for the 1963 publication *Eight Songs of Saskatchewan* and the Folkways LP *Folksongs of Saskatchewan*. Four years later Cass-Beggs published a somewhat different text in *Seven Métis Songs of Saskatchewan*. Jeannotte told Cass-Beggs that the song had been written while Riel was being held in prison in Regina between 16 May and 16 November 1885.⁵ Twenty years later Jeannotte was recorded singing “Riel’s Song” with somewhat different lyrics. In 1969 Henri Letourneau recorded Jean Rosalie Lafrenière singing a variant titled “On the field of Battle.” Both the singer and collector indicate the song was by Riel.⁶ A third recording titled “Louis Riel’s Song” was made in 1984 by Joe Venne who learned the song from his uncle Patrice Monet dit Bellehumeur, the brother of Riel’s wife Marguerite.⁷

The point I am getting to is that the editor of the collected poems, Glen Campbell, doubts that Riel wrote the song, and in a note to the 1984 publication of "Riel's Farewell" Edith Fowke notes that the Deputy Editor of *The Collected Writings*, Tom Flanagan, suggests that the song was not in Riel's style and that it was "more probable that it was composed by one of Riel's followers using a traditional pattern and an old French tune."

In my opinion Flanagan suffers from a severe case of “confirmation bias,”

5 His recording can be heard here: <http://citizenfreak.com/titles/315100-compilation-folk-songs-of-saskatchewan>.

6 http://archiveshsb.mb.ca/en/list?q=%2BsetName:%22Henri%20L%C3%A9on%20A9tourneau%22%20%2BObjectType:%22documents%20sonores%22%20%2Bsrc:Archives&p=2&ps=20&sort=title_sort%20asc starting at 2 - 30:05.

⁷ Venne's rendition was self-recorded and collected by Donald Deschenes and is held in the Centre Franco-Ontarien de Folklore at the University of Sudbury, but not available on their digital archive.

referring to Riel's English language poetry as "doggerel." Given a choice between two opinions of Riel's poetry offered by Riel's classmates, he prefers the worst. Eustache Prud'homme, who published some of Riel's work while Riel was still alive and stayed in touch with him, says he was "an excellent poet," whereas Dr. J.O. Mousseau in his 1886 book *Une Page D'Histoire*, a remembrance of Riel, says:

Sometimes he cultivated the Muses, or sought to bestride Pegasus, but I must confess at once that this illustrious steed proved rather too stubborn, and he was never able to ride him in a skillful manner, that is to say, Louis Riel never was able to produce even a short piece of poetry bearing the mark of good style or sound criticism.

This quote is the beginning and pretty much the end of the critical reception of Riel's poetry. Further to Flanagan's bias: "I finished my biography of Riel, worked on the collected edition of his writings, and published a book debunking his role as hero of the North-West Rebellion."⁸

Perhaps strangely, given what I have said, I am somewhat in agreement with Flanagan's assessment of Riel's Song. Folklorist Phil Thomas traces the song to the French language folk song "The Blood Letter."⁹ According to Thomas, Conrad Laforte's Catalogue¹⁰ lists 56 examples collected in eight provinces, including Quebec and two New England states. It is quite likely that Riel would have encountered the song in New England or Quebec and brought it west, adapting it to his own situation. It is not hard to imagine Riel in the four days after the fall of Batoche, before he surrendered to two of Middleton's scouts, softly singing "Riel's Song" to comfort those Métis who were still beside him.

I would suggest that Riel was the singer who arranged and popularized his version of "Riel's Song," and the Sauvé text lends credence to this point of view. To question the authorship of "The Fields of Battle" or "Riel's Farewell" is to miss the point: this is "Riel's Song." I can imagine, in the four days after the battle of Batoche when Riel was visiting the camps of warriors and their families, while considering whether to surrender or escape, he would sing this song.

8 Thomas Flanagan, "Legends of the Calgary School: Their Guns, Their Dogs, and the Women Who Love Them," in *Hunting and Weaving: Empiricism and Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Heilke and John von Heyking (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2013), p. 26.

9 Philip J. Thomas, *The "Louis Riel Song": A Perspective*, *Canadian Folk Music Journal* Vol. 21, p. 26.

10 Conrad Laforte, *Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française* (1977-87).