

## Riel: In His Time and Ours

Can historical significance be determined shortly following an event, or is time needed to determine an event's significance? Read the following accounts from Riel's time and the present day to consider how perspectives on Riel have evolved over time.

**LA PATRIE**, Montréal, May 18, 1885

Yes, we say it again, Riel is just a madman, a visionary entirely without responsibility for his acts. He is a moonstruck fellow whose sickly excitation naturally made a great impression on the minds of the primitive people who took him for a sort of prophet.

**L'ELECTEUR**, Québec City, June 25, 1885

History will dedicate a glorious page to you and your name will be inscribed in the hearts and souls of all true French-Canadians. Your personal faults will be overlooked in the face of your struggle for the noble cause you champion. Jeanne d'Arc! Napoléon! Chénier! Riel! It is with the greatest respect that I pronounce your revered names. Chénier has his monument. Riel, you will have yours.

**THE SELKIRK HERALD**, quoted in the *Toronto Mail*, December 5, 1885

We consider that such lives as that of Riel are blots and stains on our humanity which ought to be summarily removed by the hand of justice in like manner as the dangerous cancer is removed from the human body by the hand of the surgeon.

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In the largest sense, Riel has become a legendary figure—even a hero—of mythological proportions . . . [He] serves as the historic spokesman and symbol for the aspirations of his people . . . He has come to represent not only Métis but [also] aboriginal resistance to Canadian assimilation. He is a hero of francophone efforts to preserve a language, religion, and culture in western Canada . . . Riel has served to embody spirited resistance to the centralizing imperialism of a Canada dominated by Protestant Ontario, not merely in political but also in intellectual and emotional terms as well. The Canada which Riel opposed . . . had a very distinct view on how the West should be developed and how the resulting nation should look. That Canada was unilingual and unicultural. It was not sympathetic to minority groups of any description. It believed in one single and integrated version of Canadian historical development . . . [Of] course, Riel does not have to symbolize resistance to anything in particular, but simply a spirit of rebellion and protest, of willingness to stand up and oppose the illegitimate exploitation of self and community by the system and even by the inexorable forces of history . . . Riel was and is many things to many people: madman, prophet, murderer, saviour. Canadians do not have much of a pantheon of great heroes, and there are certainly few resisters in that collection. One of our most enduring heroes is Louis Riel—the righteous rebel.

### EXPLORATIONS

1. Do you think views of Riel from his own time accurately assessed his significance as a historical figure? If he had not been executed, do you think ideas about him today would be different?

2. In a small group or as a class, discuss your own views on Riel. Have perspectives changed significantly since Riel's time, or are they still much the same? How can you account for what has changed and stayed the same?