

Redeeming Riel

By Lois Drew

Two found poems, "The Last Words of Louis Riel" by John Robert Colombo and "Found Poem: Louis Riel Addresses the Jury" by Raymond Souster, evoke strikingly different images of Louis Riel. Although both poems are taken almost verbatim from the two speeches Riel gave during his trial, before and after the verdict was delivered, selective editing by the poets produces quite disparate constructions of Riel. Colombo sees him as a religious, pious man, truly the prophet Riel claimed to be. Souster, however, downplays Riel's religious aspect and instead portrays him as a political leader of the Metis, victimized by Macdonald's government. How have two images of Riel emerged from the poets' reproduction of the same found evidence? In her article "Redeeming Prose: Colombo's Found Poetry," Manina Jones points out that "in the reading of the found poem, the 'same' text becomes somehow 'other' " (51): the prose passage, rearranged and represented as a poem, challenges the reader to interpret, analyze, and reassess. A close study of "The Last Words of Louis Riel" and "Found Poem: Louis Riel Addresses the Jury," however, indicates that more is involved here than mere reader perception. Comparison of the poems with each other and with the trial transcripts suggests that each poet set out to ensure that his particular perception of Riel was conveyed to the reader through careful selection and arrangement of passages. Rather than being left to interpret, the reader cannot escape a predetermined conclusion.

By choosing a few pertinent passages from among the fifteen thousand words that Riel spoke in court (Colombo, "Last Words" 1965), each poet is able to shape Riel into a specific persona, one which fits the poet's perception of the "real" Riel. Colombo selects those impassioned passages which reveal Riel's religious fervor, his view of precipitate events, and his prophecies of Canada's multicultural population: in short, Colombo presents Riel the prophet. Analogies and explanations are interrupted in Colombo's poem, as they were in Riel's courtroom speech, by passages in which Riel explains his mission, emphasizing God's personal support:

. . . I have yet and still that mission,
and with the help of God, who is in this box with me —
and he is on the side of my lawyers,
even with the Honourable Court, the Crown and the jury
—
to help me and to prove by the extraordinary help
that there is a Providence today in my trial
as there was a Providence in the battles of the
Saskatchewan.

(66-72)

Souster, on the other hand, downplays Riel's religious fervor. Although Riel's actual courtroom speech had heavy references to God and Providence, there are only four brief mentions of Him made in "Louis Riel Addresses the Jury." Instead, by focussing on Riel's political views, Souster presents Riel as the leader of the Metis people, victimized by the federal government:

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. (161-67)

The only portion of Riel's testimony common to both poems is the single sentence: "If it is any satisfaction to the doctor to know what kind of insanity I have, if they are going to call my pretensions insanity, I say, humbly, through the grace of God, I believe I am the prophet of the New World" (*Queen v. Riel*: 1886 152). The words that the poets link to that statement provide the key to their interpretations of Riel's character. As he appears in Colombo's poem, Riel always refers to himself as part of the Metis group, never as their leader. Colombo precedes the poems' one common sentence with Riel's actual lead-in statement:

. . . I am no more than you are. I am simply one of the
flock,
equal to the rest. If it is any satisfaction to the doctor
to know what kind of insanity I have, if they are going
to call my pretensions insanity, I say, humbly,
through the grace of God,
I believe I am the prophet of the New World. (104-109)

This "one of the flock" focus is echoed by Riel's consistent

references to "we," including himself as part of the larger Metis community: "We took up arms, we made hundreds of prisoners, and we negotiated" (122). In contrast, Souster's poem portrays Riel much more as a political leader of the Metis. Here, the key sentence quoted in both poems is followed immediately by Riel's political complaints against the federal government:

. . . If it is any satisfaction to the doctor to know
what kind of insanity I have,
if they are going to call my pretensions insanity,
I say, humbly, through the grace of God
I believe I am the prophet of the New World. . . .
The only things I would like to call your attention to
before you retire to deliberate, are:
1st. That the House of Commons, Senate,
and ministers of the Dominion who make laws for this
land
and govern it are no representation whatever
of the people of the North West. (102-112)

Though these two excerpts are separated by an entire page in the transcript of the speech, Souster has chosen to place them together in the same stanza, downplaying Riel's prophet image and emphasizing his political one. Throughout his poem, Souster has included passages which reinforce Riel's leadership role: "I am the founder of Manitoba" (24); "I am the leader of the half-breeds" (96).

Coincidentally, the sentence common to both poems occurs in their tenth stanzas. However, in each poem the six stanzas following that sentence originate in slightly different circumstances from the wide-ranging thoughts expressed by Riel during his first address to the court. For instance, Colombo's final six paragraphs are chosen from a second speech, which Riel made a day later and after the jury had delivered its verdict finding him guilty of treason. These paragraphs echo the themes of the previous stanzas: the political situation leading to rebellion, an analogy to explain the situation, and references to Riel's prophecies. Riel's second speech to the court was entirely secular — in fact, quite striking in its near-total absence of religious references. This change of focus is also evident towards the end of Colombo's poem: Riel's prayers for God's help have vanished. In contrast, although the final stanzas in Souster's poem are taken from the closing arguments of Riel's first speech, they were apparently words which Riel chose to read aloud almost verbatim from notes he had made some time prior to his address to the court (Riel 155). Whereas Riel began his courtroom

speech in an extemporaneous manner, for his most convincing, clever arguments, he evidently relied heavily on his notes, seldom deviating from his pre-planned wording. All of these final comments are of a legal or political nature; none are prophetic. The "insane" prophet has his wits about him and is clearly concerned with his own survival.

Though the two poems reveal quite different interpretations of Riel, they are both based on the original 1886 court report of *The Queen v. Louis Riel*, even though Souster's interpretation was published three years after the University of Toronto's transcript had been printed. Except for the one passage common to both poems, Souster's chosen excerpts are carefully interspersed among the selections that Colombo chose. One almost wonders if Souster had previously noted Colombo's selected passages and intentionally avoided them. Nevertheless, each poet treats the chosen passages differently in his creation of the found poem, which reflects his particular understanding of found poetry. Colombo regards his redeemed prose as a creative collaboration between himself and another writer (*Mackenzie Poems* 7). Souster, however, aims to capture "moments in human history which can never be redeemed" (Davey 157): He intends to preserve an image, a moment, an event. These different approaches can be seen in each poet's treatment and arrangement of the found passages, and thus his unique construction of Riel's persona.

In fashioning his found poem, Colombo has made minor changes in verb tenses, punctuation, and prepositions, which are, for the most part, insignificant: although Riel's English was not perfect, his intended meaning is quite clear. Other discrepancies between poem and source occur when Colombo chooses to alter a word, thus imparting his predetermined impression. For example, Colombo's line, "there is a Providence today in my trial" (71), depicts Riel as confident and objective; the transcript's line, "here is a Providence today in my trial" (*Queen v. Riel* 148), suggests Riel felt a much closer, more personal association with God. Similarly, Colombo's passage

Well, my little sister, the Cree tribe,
you have a great territory, but that territory
has been given to you as your own land,
has been given to our fathers in England,
or in France, and of course you cannot exist
without having that spot of land. (145-150)

changes the implications of Riel's statement as it is recorded in the

transcript: ". . . that territory has been given to you as our own land has been given to our fathers in England or in France . . ." (*Queen v. Riel* 159). Colombo's alteration to "your own land" emphasizes the fact that the territory belongs to the Cree tribe as well as to "our fathers" in England and France; it suggests a unity of all people living on the land. However, the court transcript suggests that Riel was actually comparing the two situations: territory was given by God to the Cree just as Cree land was given by the Canadian government to England and France. Perhaps the court transcriber misunderstood Riel's pronunciation. Perhaps Colombo intended to alter the effect. Whatever the reason, Riel's original intentions are now obscured.

A more curious discrepancy occurs among various editions of the Riel trial transcripts. Faithful to the 1886 version, Colombo records Riel's immigration plan:

I say my heart will never abandon
the idea of having a new island in the North-West,
by constitutional means,
inviting the Irish of the other side of the sea
to come and have a share here. (166-70)

Two subsequently published transcripts, *The Queen v. Louis Riel* (University of Toronto, 1974) and the passages "Address to the Jury" and "Address to the Court" in *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel* (University of Alberta, 1985), both refer to "a new Ireland in the North-West" (*Queen v. Riel* 367; *Collected Writings* 556). Again, the difference is perhaps due to misunderstanding of Riel's pronunciation, but in this case, the implications of each word are markedly distinct. Did he indeed hope for an island, an isolated, self-contained, self-sufficient pocket of settlers? Probably not. Judging from the structure of the passage, in which Riel identifies several nationalities to be invited to settle in the West, Riel said "Ireland" intending to specify it as one of seven countries he foresaw sharing land in the Canadian West. In this instance, Colombo was faithful to the transcript, but it appears the original transcript is inaccurate.

In contrast to Colombo's poem, Souster's poem has remained faithful to the printed 1886 text of Riel's speech except for minor changes in verb tenses. Unlike Colombo, Souster has invariably indicated by ellipses the omission of passages; otherwise, the words as he has quoted them are as they were spoken in court. Only one word has been updated: Riel's reference to the Government's "offspring the North-West Council" (141) was actually its "little

one" (recorded in all three transcripts and Riel's pre-planned notes) — the expression of a paternal, family-oriented man. Perhaps Souster feels "offspring" is more appropriate for the leadership role he has constructed for Riel. There is, however, a subtle tendency through Souster's omissions of words to downplay Riel's emphatic forcefulness. For example, two omissions in the fourteenth stanza reduce Riel's intended emphasis, which is present in the 1886, 1974 and 1985 transcripts:

By the testimony laid before you during my trial,
witnesses on both sides made it certain that petition after
petition
has been sent to the Federal Government,
and so irresponsible is that Government to the North
West,
that in the course of several years besides doing nothing
to satisfy the people of this great land,
it has hardly been able to answer once
or to give a single response.
That fact would indicate lack of responsibility
and therefore insanity complicated with paralysis. (130-
139)

Presumably, the word "even" has been removed from "it has [even] hardly been able to answer once" (136) to improve the grammar. However, Souster's intentional omission of "absolute" from "that fact would indicate [absolute] lack of responsibility" (138) is clearly a watering down of Riel's intensity and emphasis.

Souster is not alone in his tendency to subtly soften Riel's intensity. It appears that "updated" transcripts, presumably accurate historical documents, are following the same trend. Souster's poem accurately records the 1886 wording, "and it is not without presumption" (20), the litotes and meaning of which correspond to the parallel phrasing in the adjacent lines; however, the 1974 and 1985 versions of Riel's speech alter this line to "and it is without any presumption" (*Queen v. Riel* 318; *Collected Writings* 530), phrasing which is less egotistical in its effect. Further on, in stanza twelve, Souster accurately quotes the 1886 passage: "by the science which has been shown here yesterday / you are compelled to admit it / there is no responsibility, it is insane" (125-27). Both recent transcripts record this argument as "you are compelled to admit if there is no responsibility, it is insane" (*Queen v. Riel* 313; *Collected Writings* 535). Once again, the apparent force and eloquence of Riel's wording has been undercut, reducing his demand to a mere hypothetical possibility. Despite the changes,

Souster conscientiously though selectively attempts to recapture and preserve a momentous event. In his found poem he has faithfully recorded the words of the 1886 report; one must wonder if the 1886 report faithfully recorded Riel's words.

In addition to the actual words redeemed — selected to portray a particular image of Riel — the poets' arrangements of their chosen lines reveal their differing approaches to found poetry which, in turn, help to create their different constructions of Riel. Colombo assumes a creative role in his collaborative partnership with Riel, breaking the passages wherever he wishes "into lines that could correspond to rhythmical units" (Colombo, "Last Words" 1965). Colombo's poem is filled with enjambed lines, particularly in paragraphs nine to thirteen. Many simply continue Riel's thought, linking the ideas into a unit, echoing the flow of the original speech. Other lines are carefully structured to achieve emphasis ("A treaty was made. The treaty was made by a delegation of both parties" [123]), intentional ambiguity ("We took up arms against the invaders from the East / without knowing them. They were so far apart from us" [110-111]), or irony ("I hope you will not take that / as a presumptuous assertion. It has been a great success" [74-75]). Souster, on the other hand, provides documentary evidence in accordance with his goal of recreating a moment in history. His poem has only three enjambed lines; instead, Souster breaks the lines at natural pauses following complete phrases or clauses according to the transcript punctuation. A very occasional short line, such as "Practical results" (68) or "a prophet of evil?" (88), adds emphasis. Souster's end pauses, longer than the breaks in Colombo's enjambed lines, underscore the importance of each idea and realistically evoke Riel's pause-filled, emphatic speaking style.

Once again, the one sentence common to both poems illustrates the poets' differing approaches to reshaping historical material and in constructing Riel's persona. Colombo's tenth paragraph reads:

If it is any satisfaction to the doctor
to know what kind of insanity I have, if they are going
to call my pretensions insanity, I say, humbly,
through the grace of God,
I believe I am the prophet of the New World. (105-09)

Souster's passage begins:

. . . If it is any satisfaction to the doctor to know
what kind of insanity I have,
if they are going to call my pretensions insanity,

I say humbly, through the grace of God
I believe I am the prophet of the New World. . . . (102-06)

Colombo's arrangement of lines emphasizes the uncertainty of the accusations and stresses Riel's humility. Further, the added comma subordinates "through the grace of God" which emphasizes the final line. Enjambed lines help to create the overall effect of an agitated speaker. In contrast, Souster follows Riel's units of thought and accurately records the transcript's punctuation which links the final two lines more closely. By slowing the flow of ideas through end breaks, Souster successfully conveys the impression of Riel as a thoughtful, polished orator.

Souster's care in presenting Riel's words, as well as his indication of omissions, is in stark contrast to Colombo's more creative approach as evident in his second-last stanza. Though Colombo states that his poem is "rearranged and printed virtually verbatim" (*Abracadabra* 127), intense editorial "rearrangement" has lifted Riel's words from their original context, not merely redeeming them, but creating a new life for them through juxtaposition. This stanza is composed of five wholly unrelated sentences selected from Riel's second courtroom speech and presented in this stanza in random order. Taken as a whole, the paragraph seems to reflect the prophetic nature of Riel's words: though hoping for peace, he fears his immigration plans may bring disaster. Though his influence has grown over fifteen years, his drive to do right causes some to regard him as insane:

My thoughts are for peace.
But such a great revolution will bring immense disasters
and I don't want to bring disasters during my life
except those that I am bound to bring to defend my own
life
and to avoid, to take away from my country, disasters
which threaten me and my friends and those who have
confidence
in me. Of course they gave a chance to Riel to come out,
a rebel had a chance to be loyal then.
But with the immense influence that my acts are gathering
for the last fifteen years and which,
as the power of steam contained in an engine
will have its way, then what will I do?
I may be declared insane
because I seek such an idea,
which drives me to something right. (196-210)

In actuality, these statements had more self-serving intentions. The first two sentences originally occurred among the immigration plans Colombo has assembled in the preceding stanza; thus, in their new poetic arrangement these first two sentences are still in context: the "great revolution" of which Riel speaks will result from his multicultural immigration plans. The third sentence, however, is located three pages earlier in the transcript, during Riel's recounting of events of 1871, in particular the federal government's poor treatment of him when they suddenly posted a \$5000 reward for his arrest instead of granting the promised amnesty. The fourth sentence comes yet another three pages earlier, among Riel's repetitive, rambling explanations of his plans for the future and his belief that he will be granted clemency. (This sentence is welded into the stanza with the addition of Colombo's transition "but with.") In answer to his rhetorical question, "then what will I do?" (207), Riel explained to the court that he expected to go to the Dominion ministry to implement his plans by constitutional means. The final sentence of this stanza was spoken during Riel's closing remarks. In the poem, his reference to "such an idea" (209) seems to refer to his immigration intentions. In actuality, Riel was requesting an appointed commission to investigate and exonerate his actions over the previous fifteen years. His reference to the future, "I may be declared insane" (208), indicates that he has little doubt the commission will sit. Re-situated in the poem's context, this statement reflects the confusion in Riel's mind by contradicting his earlier comment, "I have been asserted to be wrong today" (163). In this second last paragraph, the only such collage in the poem, Colombo has technically printed Riel's words "virtually verbatim," but the rearrangement now creates an impression that Riel himself did not intend. In this instance, far from allowing the reader to interpret a found passage, the poet has carefully shaped an inescapable perception.

In "The Last Words of Louis Riel" and "Found Poem: Louis Riel Addresses the Jury," John Robert Colombo and Raymond Souster are able to construct a persona for an archival character, a distinct, original Louis Riel. In addition to selected passages, which enhance a particular image, the poems also reflect the contemporary social concerns of Canadians. Before Pierre Trudeau resurrected Riel's name in 1967, in a speech on Canadian culture and nationalism, Canadians regarded Riel as a mystic (Dales 9). Colombo's poem, written as Canada approached its centennial year, also reflects the temporary feeling of national unity. These attitudes are present in Colombo's construction of Riel as prophet as well as member of the larger group and supporter of the mother

country. Different social values prevalent in 1977, a time when Western regionalism was growing, are reflected in Souster's poem, which presents Riel as a political leader, frustrated in his efforts to deal with the federal government. Most recently, ongoing efforts on several fronts to re-shape Riel's persona, modify his words, and revise his reputation culminated last March as Constitutional Minister Joe Clark rose in the House of Commons to honour Riel as a Canadian hero: the founder of Manitoba and a defender of native rights. The same political party which once hanged Riel for treason has now honoured him for his contribution to Confederation. The man once barred from taking his seat in Parliament has now received official recognition from all three political parties. In addition, the Alberta government (also Conservative) recently petitioned Ottawa to grant Louis Riel a pardon. Both Ron Macleod, University of Alberta historian, and Thomas Flanagan, University of Calgary political scientist, object to this move because it distorts and falsifies history. Perhaps this ultimate exoneration of Riel is the result of years of tiny revisions of documents, subtle in themselves, yet persuasive in their overall effect; nevertheless, Louis Riel is being reshaped once again to reflect contemporary social concerns of Canadians.

During the last century, Riel's reputation has undergone a dramatic change, from renegade fanatic to quintessential Canadian hero. Just as the historian is able to influence opinion by selection, arrangement, and interpretation of facts, so is the found poet able to mould a perception through selective editing of historical documents. One aspect of an event becomes minimized, obscured, or omitted while another is emphasized, reinterpreted, permitted to survive. Both "The Last Words of Louis Riel" and "Found Poem: Louis Riel Addresses the Jury" are based on the same document, yet each poet has created a unique persona, his perception of the "real" Riel. Colombo's "imaginative paragraphs" redeem the Prophet of the New World; Souster's poem has preserved, perhaps more accurately, "an image, a moment, an event." Ultimately, both found poems redeem a perception, revive a piece of history, ensure an interpretation, and create a mythology.

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