



*Excerpt from*

## THE TESTIMONY OF LOUIS RIEL

LOUIS RIEL

1885

Your Honours, gentlemen of the jury: It would be easy for me today to play insanity, because the circumstances are such as to excite any man, and under the natural excitement of what is taking place today (I cannot speak English very well, but am trying to do so, because most of those here speak English), under the excitement which my trial causes me would justify me not to appear as usual, but with my mind out of its ordinary condition. I hope with the help of God I will maintain calmness and decorum as suits this honourable court, this honourable jury.

You have seen by the papers in the hands of the Crown that I am naturally inclined to think of God at the beginning of my actions. I wish if you – I do it you won't take it as a mark of insanity, that you won't take it as part of a play of insanity. Oh,

my God, help me through Thy grace and the divine influence of Jesus Christ. Oh, my God, bless me, bless this honourable court, bless this honourable jury, bless my good lawyers who have come 700 leagues to try to save my life, bless also the lawyers for the Crown, because they have done, I am sure, what they thought their duty. They have shown me fairness which at first I did not expect from them. Oh, my God, bless all those who are around me through the grace and influence of Jesus Christ our Saviour, change the curiosity of those who are paying attention to me, change that curiosity into sympathy with me. The day of my birth I was helpless and my mother took care of me although she was not able to do it alone, there was someone to help her to take care of me and I lived. Today, although a man, I am as helpless before this court, in the Dominion of Canada and in this world, as I was helpless on the knees of my mother the day of my birth.

The North-West is also my mother, it is my mother country and although my mother country is sick and confined in a certain way, there are some from Lower Canada who came to help her to take care of me during her sickness and I am sure that my mother country will not kill me more than my mother did forty years ago when I came into the world, because a mother is always a mother, and even if I have my faults if she can see I am true she will be full of love for me.

When I came into the North-West in July, the first of July 1884, I found the Indians suffering. I found the half-breeds eating the rotten pork of the Hudson Bay Company and getting sick and weak every day. Although a half-breed, and having no pretension to help the whites, I also paid attention to them. I saw they were deprived of responsible government, I saw that they were deprived of their public liberties. I remembered that half-breed meant white and Indian, and while I paid attention to the suffering Indians and the half-breeds I remembered that the greatest part of my heart and blood was white and I have directed my attention to help the Indians, to help the half-breeds and to help the whites to the best of my ability. We have made

petitions, I have made petitions with others to the Canadian Government asking to relieve the condition of this country. We have taken time; we have tried to unite all classes, even, if I may speak, all parties. Those who have been in close communication with me know I have suffered, that I have waited for months to bring some of the people of the Saskatchewan to an understanding of certain important points in our petition to the Canadian Government and I have done my duty. I believe I have done my duty. It has been said in this box that I have been egotistic. Perhaps I am egotistic. A man cannot be individuality without paying attention to himself. He cannot generalize himself, though he may be general. I have done all I could to make good petitions with others, and we have sent them to the Canadian Government, and when the Canadian Government did answer, through the Under-Secretary of State, to the secretary of the joint committee of the Saskatchewan, then I began to speak of myself, not before; so my particular interests passed after the public interests. A good deal has been said about the settlement and division of lands, a good deal has been said about that. I do not think my dignity today here would allow me to mention the foreign policy, but if I was to explain to you or if I had been allowed to make the questions to witnesses, those questions would have appeared in an altogether different light before the court and jury. I do not say that my lawyers did not put the right questions. The observations I had the honour to make to the court the day before yesterday were good, they were absent of the situation, they did not know all the small circumstances as I did. I could mention a point, but that point was leading to so many that I could not have been all the time suggesting. By it I don't wish it understood that I do not appreciate the good works of my lawyers, but if I were to go into all the details of what has taken place, I think I could safely show you that what Captain Young said that I am aiming all the time at practical results was true, and I could have proved it. During my life I have aimed at practical results. I have writings, and after my

doctors believed to be insane, Bishop Bourget wrote again and said: "Be ye blessed by God and man and take patience in your evils." Am I not taking patience? Will I be blessed by man as I have been by God?"

I say that I have been blessed by God, and I hope that you will not take that as a presumptuous assertion. It has been a great success for me to come through all the dangers I have in that fifteen years. If I have not succeeded in wearing a fine coat myself I have at the same time the great consolation of seeing that God has maintained my view; that He has maintained my health sufficiently to go through the world, and that he has kept me from bullets, when bullets marked my hat. I am blessed by God. It is this trial that is going to show that I am going to be blessed by man during my existence, the benedictions are a guarantee that I was not wrong when by circumstances I was taken away from adopted land to my native land. When I see British people sitting in the court to try me, remembering that the English people are proud of that word "fair-play," I am confident that I will be blessed by God and by man also.

Not only Bishop Bourget spoke to me in that way, but Father Jean Baptiste Bruno, the priest of Worcester, who was my director of conscience, said to me: "Riel, God has put an object into your hands, the cause of the triumph of religion in the world, take care, you will succeed when most believe you have lost." I have got those words in my heart, those words of J.B. Bruno and the late Archbishop Bourget. But last year, while I was yet in Montana, and while I was passing before the Catholic church, the priest, the Reverend Father Frederick Ebeville, curate of the church of the Immaculate Conception, at Benton, said to me: "I am glad to see you; is your family here?" I said: "Yes." He said: "Go and bring them to the altar, I want to bless you before you go away." And with Gabriel Dumont and my family we all went on our knees at the altar, the priest put on his surplice and he took holy water and was going to bless us, I said: "Will you allow me to pronounce a prayer while you bless me?"

He said: "Yes, I want to know what it is." I told him the prayer. It is speaking to God: "My Father, bless me according to the views of Thy Providence which are bountiful and without measure." He said to me: "You can say that prayer while I bless you." Well, he blessed me and I pronounced that prayer for myself, for my wife, for my children, and for Gabriel Dumont.

When the glorious General Middleton fired on us during three days, and on our families, and when shells went and bullets went as thick as mosquitoes in the hot days of summer, when I saw my children, my wife, myself and Gabriel Dumont were escaping, I said that nothing but the blessing without measure of Father Frederick Ebeville could save me, and that can save me today from these charges. The benediction promised to me surrounded me all the time in the Saskatchewan, and since it seems to me that I have seen it. Captain Deane, Corporal Prickert, and the corporal of the guard who have been appointed over me have been so gentle while the papers were raging against me shows that nothing but the benediction of God could give me the favour I have had in remaining so respected among these men. Today when I saw the glorious General Middleton bearing testimony that he thought I was not insane, and when Captain Young proved that I am not insane, I felt that God was blessing me, and blotting away from my name the blot resting upon my reputation on account of having been in the lunatic asylum of my good friend Dr. Roy. I have been in an asylum, but I thank the lawyers for the Crown who destroyed the testimony of my good friend Dr. Roy, because I have always believed that I was put in the asylum without reason. Today my pretension is guaranteed, and that is a blessing too in that way. I have also been in the lunatic asylum at Longue Pointe, and I wonder that my friend Dr. Lachapelle, who took care of me charitably, and Dr. Howard are not here. I was there perhaps under my own name.

Even if I was going to be sentenced by you, gentlemen of the jury, I have this satisfaction if I die - that if I die I will not be reputed by all men as insane, as a lunatic....

The agitation in the North-West Territories would have been constitutional, and would certainly be constitutional today if, in my opinion, we had not been attacked. Perhaps the Crown has not been able to find out the particulars, that we were attacked, but as we were on the scene, it was easy to understand. When we sent petitions to the Government, they used to answer us by sending police, and when the rumours were increasing every day that Riel had been shot here or there, or that Riel was going to be shot by such and such a man, the police would not pay any attention to it. I am glad that I have mentioned the police, because of the testimony that has been given in the box during the examination of many of the witnesses. If I had been allowed to put questions to the witnesses, I would have asked them when it was I said a single word against a single policeman or a single officer. I have respected the policemen, and I do today, and I have respected the officers of the police; the paper that I sent to Major Crozier is a proof of it: "We respect you, Major." There are papers which the Crown has in its hands, and which show that demoralization exists among the police, if you will allow me to say it in the court, as I have said it in writing.

Your Honours, gentlemen of the jury: If I was a man of today perhaps it would be presumptuous to speak in that way, but the truth is good to say, and it is said in a proper manner, and it is without any presumption, it is not because I have been libelled for fifteen years that I do not believe myself something. I know that through the grace of God, I am the founder of Manitoba. I know that though I have no open road for my influence, I have big influence, concentrated as a big amount of vapour in an engine. I believe by what I suffered for fifteen years, by what I have done for Manitoba, and the people of the North-West, that my words are worth something. If I give offence, I do not speak to insult. Yes, you are the pioneers of civilization, the whites are the pioneers of civilization, but they bring among the Indians demoralization. Do not be offended, ladies, do not be offended, here are the men who can cure that evil; and if at times

protesting against us, and that we were two protestants in our different ways.

As to religion, what is my belief? What is my insanity about that? My insanity, your Honours, gentlemen of the jury, is that I wish to leave Rome aside, inasmuch as it is the cause of division between Catholics and Protestants. I did not wish to force my views, because in Batoche to the half-breeds that followed me I use the word, *carte blanche*. If I have any influence in the new world it is to help in that way and even if it takes 200 years to become practical, then after my death that will bring out practical results, and then my children's children will shake hand with the Protestants of the new world in a friendly manner. I do not wish these evils which exist in Europe to be continued, as much as I can influence it, among the half-breeds. I do not wish that to be repeated in America. That work is not the work of some days or some years, it his the work of hundreds of years.

My condition is helpless, so helpless that my good lawyers, and they have done it by conviction (Mr. Fitzpatrick in his beautiful speech has proved he believed I was insane) my condition seems to be so helpless that they have recourse to try and prove insanity to try and save me in that way. If I am insane, of course, I don't know it, it is a property of insanity to be unable to know it. But what is the kind of mission that I have? Practical results. It is said that I had myself acknowledged as a prophet by the half-breeds. The half-breeds have some intelligence. Captain Young who has been so polite and gentle during the time I was under his care, said that what was done at Batoche, from a military point of view was nice, that the line of defence was nice, that showed some intelligence.

It is not to be supposed that the half-breeds acknowledged me as a prophet if they had not seen that I could see something into the future. If I am blessed without measure I can see something into the future, we all see into the future more or less. As what kind of prophet would I come, would it be a prophet would all the time have a stick in his hand, and threatening, a

defect of its parent. Third, the number of members elected for the Council by the people make it only a sham representative legislature and no representative government at all.

British civilization which rules today the world, and the British constitution has defined such government as this is which rules the North-West Territories as irresponsible government, which plainly means that there is no responsibility, and by all the science which has been shown here yesterday you are compelled to admit if there is no responsibility, it is insane.

Good sense combined with scientific theories lead to the same conclusion. By the testimony laid before you during my trial witnesses on both sides made it certain that petition after petition had 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 even hardly been able to answer once or to give a single response. That fact would indicate an absolute lack of responsibility, and therefore insanity complicated with paralysis.

The Ministers of an insane and irresponsible Government and its little one - the North-West Council - made up their minds to answer my petitions by surrounding me slyly and by attempting to jump on me suddenly and upon my people in the Saskatchewan. Happily when they appeared and showed their teeth to devour, I was ready: that is what is called my crime of high treason, and to which they hold me today. Oh, my good jurors, in the name of Jesus Christ, the only one who can save and help me, they have tried to tear me to pieces.

If you take the plea of the defence that I am not responsible for my acts, acquit me completely since I have been quarrelling with an insane and irresponsible Government. If you pronounce in favour of the Crown, which contends that 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....

For fifteen years, I have been neglecting myself. Even one of the most hard witnesses on me said that with all my vanity, I never was particular to my clothing; yes, because I never had much to buy any clothing. The Rev. Father André has often had the kindness to feed my family with a sack of flour, and Father Fourmand. My wife and children are without means, while I am working more than any representative in the North-West. Although I am simply a guest of this country – a guest of the half-breeds of Saskatchewan – although as a simple guest, I worked to better the condition of the people of the Saskatchewan at the risk of my life, to better the condition of the people of the North-West, I have never had any pay. It has always been my hope to have a fair living one day. It will be for you to pronounce – if you say I was right, you can conscientiously acquit me, as I hope through the help of God you will. You will console those who have been fifteen years around me only partaking in my sufferings. What you will do in justice to me, in justice to my family, in justice to my friends, in justice to the North-West, will be rendered a hundred times to you in this world, and to use a sacred expression, life everlasting in the other.

I thank your Honour for the favour you have granted me in speaking; I thank you for the attention you have given me, gentlemen of the jury, and I thank those who have had the kindness to encourage my imperfect way of speaking the English language by your good attention. I put my speech under the protection of my God, my Saviour, He is the only one who can make it effective. It is possible it should become effective, as it is proposed to good men, to good people, and to good ladies also.