Louis: The Heretic Poems
by Gregory Scofield
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Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Finally, a Western Canadian, a Métis, writing about the mythic Western Canadian hero Louis Riel, whose first language was French and who was raised a devout Catholic. Father of Confederation for Manitoba, elected to parliament three times but unable to take his seat in Ottawa because of the warrant out for his arrest. Exiled, begged to return. Resisting armed conflict, turning himself in. Tried and, against the jury’s recommendation, hanged for treason.

Gregory Scofield’s Louis: The Heretic Poems offers a new portrait of a leader who played a pivotal role in our history. Sketching a character involves describing what he looks like, what he says, what he does, and what others say about him. What Louis Riel looks like in the cover painting, straight black hair streaked with white, seems to offer a new image, belying Riel’s forty-one years and the famous brown curls. What Louis says, Scofield weaves into his own poems, citing excerpts from the Riel diaries and publications. What Louis does, the hero’s actions, are there, for the most part, explicated with footnotes confirming the love affairs, engagements, institutionalization, the wife and children, the final days. However, there are major gaps that are not covered, especially his successes in Manitoba, his election victories, his years in exile. What others say about him includes citations from Hansard, eastern newspapers, and a letter from his military deputy, Gabriel Dumont. Scofield chooses to focus on Louis the man, rather than on Louis the hero, the traitor, the lunatic, the religious fanatic, or the martyr to racism and religious rivalry.

Louis: The Heretic Poems is divided into four sections. The first section, “Le Garçon / The Boy” situates Louis in place and family: his Chipewyan great-grandmother, French-Canadian grandfather, born into love and devotion. One of three St. Boniface boys chosen to be educated in Quebec. The long 28-day trip “to civilization” (15) in Montreal, by ox-cart, steamboat, and railroad. Internalizing the lessons of sin and contrition imposed by sisters and priests. Louis’ passionate translation of adolescent lust and love into liturgy appears to be the first “heresy.” How, applying the introduced metaphors, he interprets sex as hierogamy. His growing sense of identity: “I Am a Poet” (23). His dismissal, as an educated man found unsuitable to be a priest or missionary: “better that he should be an ordinary Christian than a bad priest” (25). His attempt to come to terms with the seeming failure, comparing himself to the others “afflicted” in Bible stories, but somehow found wanting, a victim manqué, as a “sauvage,” or “not in need” (25, 26).

The second section, “Le Président / The President” covers the influx of Orangemen into the Métis homeland at Red River, and the defensive actions taken to silence dissent, to defy Macdonald. Then, fleeing to escape the country, committed to escape the internal unrest, the possible delusions of biblical grandeur. Loved again, upon his release from the New York asylum; inspiring a lover’s passionate confession.

The third section, “Le Porte-parole / The Spokesman,” is the longest. It opens with words from government-written guides for settlers, tips for immigrants, juxtaposed with the reports from First Nations chiefs of the suffering of their people. Riel writes, petitioning, charging the settlers with
treason, with stealing the food from “the half-breeds' hands” (62). Excerpts from the prime minister’s speeches in parliament attempt to justify his actions and denounce Riel. Then, in a roll-call of heroes, Riel addresses the women of Batoche while Macdonald proceeds to desecrate them – “This half-caste maiden wicked as snow” (69). The men in the trenches are visited by death and Dumont says goodbye to his beloved brother. “I see you, my Riel, aiming the cross as if God and the Virgin, all three of you in golden light, will defeat their gun and the anglais who feed it” (72). He imagines Riel, Macdonald, and the devil playing a game of poker, gambling for the country, but Macdonald is playing with a stacked deck, and Riel has a gun and six bullets. “And I will laugh to see you so free” (73). Dumont believed that weapons would speak; Riel believed in other forms of power.

The final section, “L’Homme d’État / The Statesman” includes poems written as Riel awaits execution, contemplating his notoriety, concerned about his image, responding to correspondence from family, addressing his children, Jean and Marie-Angelique, and his wife, Marguerite. Praying to his saints. Envisioning his dangling dance of death, apprehensive about the poorly chosen, ill-fitting box into which his remains, his memory, will be placed. “I ask, too, that when I am laid in a box / I am not made to look the sufferer” (86).

Scofield succeeds beautifully in sketching for us Louis, the man. However, he also succeeds in filling the subtext. Through a careful accretion of words others have spoken about Louis, the horror emerges. These words, from epigraph to conclusion, about Riel or his people, include inarticulate, doomed, sauvage, idle, wicked, not worthy, murderer, Popery, impulsive, spoiled, must be kept down, swamped, weeds, idle, lazy, agitating, misguided, half-breed, half-caste, half-caste, a wee bit of brown, devil, wanton. Through their own words, the orange easterners are incriminated, their racism and greed revealed, in the way they mistreat the land and its people in their lust for colonial power.

Gregory Scofield concludes his new picture of Louis Riel with an image of sound and light and colour, of his “iridescent / Voice” (88). What a crime, that such a fine man was executed for speaking up for, defending, leading his people. Yet, how hopeful, that we remember him, that we honour him, that we can still hear his voice.

For readings of several poems, go to the University of Manitoba’s Aboriginal Focus podcast of Robert-Falcon Ouellette’s excellent interview on At the Edge of Canada: Indigenous Research blogspot. ¶

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