

= Louis Riel (comics) =

Louis Riel is a historical biography in comics by Canadian cartoonist Chester Brown , published as a book in 2003 after serialization in 1999 ? 2003 . The story deals with Métis rebel leader Louis Riel 's antagonistic relationship with the newly established Canadian government . It begins shortly before the 1869 Red River Rebellion , and ends with Riel 's 1885 hanging for high treason . The book explores Riel 's possible schizophrenia ? he believed God had named him Prophet of the New World , destined to lead the Métis people to freedom .

The work is noted for its emotional disengagement , its intentionally flat dialogue , and a minimalist drawing style inspired by that of Harold Gray 's comic strip Little Orphan Annie . Unusual for comics of the time , it includes a full scholarly apparatus : a foreword , index , bibliography , and end notes . The lengthy , hand @-@ lettered appendix provides insight into Brown 's creative process and biases and highlights where he changed historical facts to create a more engaging story , such as incorporating a conspiracy theory not widely accepted by historians . Brown became interested in the issue of property rights while researching the book , which led to a public change in his politics from anarchism to libertarianism .

Although Brown intended it to be published only in book form , his publisher had him first serialize Louis Riel as a comic book , which lasted ten issues . The series was the first comic book to receive a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts . It won a favourable critical reception and three Harvey Awards . The serialization sold poorly , but the book version was a surprise bestseller . Its success played a major part in gaining shelf space for serious graphic novels in mainstream North American bookstores .

= = Overview = =

Subtitled " A Comic @-@ Strip Biography " , Louis Riel looks at Métis rebel leader Louis Riel and his leadership in the Red River and North @-@ West rebellions . It does not attempt a complete retelling of Riel 's life ? it omits long periods and ignores many aspects of his personality . Instead the focus is on his " antagonistic relationship with the Canadian government " from 1869 to 1885 . The story comprises 241 pages of the 271 @-@ page book , and is supplemented with a complete scholarly apparatus : a foreword , bibliography , index , map section and extensive end notes . It has strong historiographical elements , detailing in the appendix the research done and choices made by the author in developing a story .

Brown grew up in the Canadian province of Quebec , where the majority speaks French , and where Riel is often considered a martyr . However Brown , who grew up speaking only English , said he was largely ignorant of Riel 's story until he read Maggie Siggins ' 1994 biography Louis Riel : A Life of Revolution . Many of Brown 's favourite topics are entwined in Louis Riel : anti @-@ authoritarianism , outsider religion , insanity , and accuracy and objectivity in nonfiction . A central incident in the book is an eight @-@ panel sequence in which Riel has a revelatory experience on a hilltop in Washington , D.C. He experiences visions and talks to God , who declares him Prophet of the New World and instructs him to lead his people to freedom . On the cover of the book , however , we see Riel standing alone in the wilderness , staring into the sky , leaving open the question of whether what he witnessed was real .

= = Background = =

In 1995 , Brown published the anti @-@ psychiatry comics essay " My Mom was a Schizophrenic " , in which he examines society 's role in mental illness , and questions the medical profession 's accepted beliefs about it . The six @-@ page strip came with two pages of end notes gathered from his research . Brown enjoyed this project and thought he would like to take on another in which he could " cram a lot of research into a comic strip " . When he came across Siggins ' biography of Riel , he had been working on the experimental Underwater series , a project on which he felt he had lost his way . His father died in late 1997 , and he decided he did not " want to waste [his] time with

projects that weren't working out ". In 1998 , he turned his attention to Riel , putting the unpopular Underwater series on hold .

While researching , Brown came across two books by political scientist Tom Flanagan : Louis " David " Riel : " Prophet of the New World " (1996) and Louis Riel and the Rebellion : 1885 Reconsidered (2000) . Brown found " Prophet of the New World " particularly intriguing as it dealt with Riel 's religious ideas while reevaluating his alleged diagnosis of mental illness , two topics Brown had especial interest in , as he had previously made " eccentric " adaptations of the Gospel , and comics dealing with his mother 's schizophrenia . He also came across books by researcher Don McLean and historian Douglas N. Sprague that advanced the conspiracy theory that the 1885 North @-@ West Rebellion was deliberately provoked by Prime Minister John A. Macdonald to gain support for the building of the transcontinental railway .

Brown had gained a reputation for improvised storytelling by the time he began work on Louis Riel . With Underwater , he had intended to write a script , but in the end chose to improvise . He found the results unsatisfactory , and decided to write a full script beforehand for his next project . The script for Louis Riel came to over 200 pages .

Brown 's was not the first depiction of the Métis leader in comics . James Simpkins , a Canadian cartoonist best known for Jasper the Bear , made a mildly anti @-@ Riel two @-@ page strip in 1967 , and Pierre Dupuis produced a French @-@ language two @-@ page summary in 1979 . A 23 @-@ page pro @-@ Riel strip appeared in Canadian History Comic Book No. 2 : Rebellion in 1972 . In 1980 , Italian artist Hugo Pratt created a character called Jesuit Joe who was supposed to have descended from Riel . Publishing house Les Éditions des Plaines published two books on Riel : Robert Freynet 's 58 @-@ page Louis Riel en bande dessinée (" Louis Riel in Comics ") in 1990 , and Zoran and Toufik 's Louis Riel , le père du Manitoba (" Louis Riel , the Father of Manitoba ") in 1996 , both in French . Riel also played a secondary role in the 1995 comic album Le crépuscule des Bois @-@ Brûlés (" The Twilight of Bois @-@ Brûlés ") .

= = Plot = =

The government of the new Dominion of Canada (established 1867) , under Prime Minister John A. Macdonald , has made a deal with the Hudson 's Bay Company to purchase Rupert 's Land ? vast tracts of land in northern North America . The French @-@ speaking Métis ? people who are half Native , half white , and inhabit parts of Rupert 's Land ? dispute that their land can be sold to the Canadians without their consent . In the Red River settlement , the Métis , led by Louis Riel , dodge political manoeuvrings on the part of Lieutenant Governor William McDougall and some of the English @-@ speaking settlers , while seizing Fort Garry . After an armed standoff at English @-@ speaking settler John Schultz 's home , the Métis declare a provisional government and vote Riel their president , with an even number of French and English representatives . Schultz escapes from prison and rounds up a number of men with the intention of freeing the prisoners from Fort Garry , but when Riel lets the prisoners go , Schultz 's men set out for home . On the way , a number of them pass Fort Garry , where they are captured and imprisoned . One of the prisoners , Thomas Scott , relentlessly quarrels with the guards , showering them with racial epithets . Eventually , the provisional government convicts him of treason and executes him by firing squad . The remaining prisoners are released , and the provisional government enters into negotiations with Ottawa , which results in the founding of the province of Manitoba . They are unable to get an amnesty for the execution of Scott , however . The Canadian army arrives , ostensibly to keep the peace . Riel flees to the U.S. , and the anglophone population assumes governance .

Schultz takes control of Manitoba , and the government of Ontario offers a cash reward for Riel 's capture , dead or alive . Macdonald secretly sends Riel money to disappear , as his death would lose him votes in Quebec but allowing him to live would cost him votes in English Canada . Riel flees from town to town in the U.S. as bounty hunters try to track him down . In 1873 , he returns to the Manitoba and wins a seat in the federal Parliament in a by @-@ election . He fears actually sitting in parliament because there is still a bounty on his head , and continues to live in hiding . In 1874 , he wins his seat again . Schultz wins a seat in the settlement as well , however , and

Alexander Mackenzie has become Prime Minister , running on promises not to grant the rebels an amnesty . Riel is expelled from Parliament for failing to sit , but wins his seat again in the next by @-@ election . The frustrated government finally extends an amnesty to the rebels ? all except Riel , whose amnesty is conditional on a five @-@ year banishment from Canada . During his exile , he has a visionary experience on a hilltop in Washington , D.C. , in which God names him David , the Prophet of the New World , and tells him to lead the Métis to freedom . In 1876 , Riel is secretly committed by a friend to a lunatic asylum near Montréal under a false name .

Over the next several years , the Métis , unhappy with the Canadian government 's handling of their land rights , move farther west across the Prairies . There as well , they see their petitions to the government repeatedly ignored and their rights trampled on . Finally , after being ignored for too long , the Métis search for Riel in Montana , in the hope that his return will force the Canadians to take their claims seriously . He is reluctant at first , as he has started a family and settled down as a schoolmaster . In the hopes that he will get money from the Canadian government for his tenure administering the Red River settlement (by this time known as Winnipeg) , he moves his family to Batoche (now in Saskatchewan) in mid @-@ 1884 . Macdonald has returned to the prime ministership and conspires with George Stephen , president of the financially burdened Canadian Pacific Railway , to use the situation to gain support for finishing the railway . By inciting a violent revolt amongst the Métis , the government can justify funding the railway to move troops to the Prairies . The Métis under Riel respond with arms as intended . Riel declares " Rome has fallen ! " and breaks from the Catholic Church . He breathes the Holy Spirit into his followers , thereafter known as the Exovedate . Tensions build until the bloodshed at the Battle of Duck Lake , where Riel and his followers drive back the North @-@ West Mounted Police . Macdonald takes this as a cue to send two thousand troops to the area . At the Battle of Fish Creek , the outnumbered Métis manage to drive back the Canadians , but at the Battle of Batoche , while Riel is increasingly immersed in religious activities , the Métis finally suffer defeat . In the hope that his trial will provide an opportunity to get the Métis ' story to the public , Riel surrenders instead of fleeing .

In July 1885 , Riel is put on trial in Regina for his role as leader in the North @-@ West Rebellion . Against his will , Riel 's lawyer tries unsuccessfully to defend him on grounds of insanity . He is found guilty of high treason . Though the jury pleads for mercy , he is sentenced to hang . In response to the pleas of Quebecers to pardon Riel , Macdonald responds , " He shall hang though every dog in Quebec bark in his favour " . After reconciling himself with the Church , Riel is hanged in Regina on 16 November 1885 . In the aftermath , the remaining rebels receive a pardon , Macdonald and Stephen continue in their success , and Riel 's wife dies .

= = Primary characters = =

= = = Louis Riel = = =

Riel (1844 ? 85) was a French @-@ speaking Métis politician from a devoutly Catholic background . He founded and named the Province of Manitoba (a Cree word meaning " the god that speaks ") . He led the two Métis rebellions against the Canadian government : the Red River Rebellion of 1869 ? 70 and the North @-@ West Rebellion of 1885 . Following the latter , he was hanged for high treason . Riel remains an ambiguous and controversial figure in Canadian history , and Brown 's depiction maintains that ambiguity .

Riel is depicted as charismatic . He is Montréal @-@ educated and speaks English , which makes him a natural leader to the Métis , though his leadership is flawed ? he ignores the military advice of his peers in battle , placing his faith in God that the Métis will defeat the Canadians . Brown depicts him as having a messianic complex and possibly having schizophrenia . He is unsure of himself , averse to bloodshed , and easily convinced to flee to the U.S. to avoid capture .

= = = John A. Macdonald = = =

Macdonald (1815 ? 91) was the first Prime Minister of Canada , in office 1867 ? 73 , and again 1878 ? 91 . Brown depicts the Prime Minister in the role of scheming villain and caricatures his features in an absurd manner , giving him an extremely oversized nose and showing him as a drunk . He is a man of ambitions and will not let anyone stand in the way of his legacy . In the appendix , however , Brown discloses that he does not see Macdonald as the villain he has portrayed in the book . Brown 's distrust of big government leads him to push the conspiracy theory side of the story to Macdonald 's detriment , but , in the end , he states that he " would rather have lived in a state run by John A. Macdonald than one run by Louis Riel " .

= = Style = =

" My ... one goal was to make the artwork look as much as the artwork in Little Orphan Annie as possible , I was trying to draw like Harold Gray "

Louis Riel is noted for its emotional restraint , and intentionally flat and expository dialogue . To critic Rich Kreiner the book " has been rigorously scrubbed of staged drama and crowd @-@ pleasing effects " . It avoids manipulation of the reader by invoking sympathy or sentiment . Brown takes a distanced approach and relies faithfully on his source material ? he focuses on the concrete and corporeal and eschews techniques of speculation such as thought balloons . This includes his presentation of Riel 's mystical experiences , which Brown presents plainly and without interpretation of its reality or lack thereof .

The book makes frequent deliberate use of silent panels , focused on imagery with the narrative moved forward by the characters ' actions . Riel 's " despairs over the decisions he makes " are expressed through pictures , as Brown had come to believe that historical comics had been too " narration @-@ heavy " . He wanted Louis Riel " to show what the medium is capable of " , and made use of greater panel @-@ to @-@ panel continuity . While the grid of panels gives a feeling of page symmetry , the pages are not composed as a unit ? scenes change anywhere on the page with little regard to page layout .

Printed on yellowish paper , each page conforms strictly to a rhythmic six @-@ panel grid , in contrast to the free placement of panels that characterized Brown 's autobiographical period . Tone and mood are set by the composition of the panels , as during Riel 's trial when all tonal variation is dropped , and the white figures are placed against a heavy black background , which emphasizes the claustrophobic atmosphere .

Brown makes the language barriers that separate the characters visual by having Riel drop the letter " h " in his dialogue (e.g. " over t 'e last several days ") and by putting French @-@ language dialogue in ? chevron brackets ? and Cree language dialogue in ? ? double @-@ chevrons ? ? . He shows Riel , who was an educated and sophisticated speaker of French , struggling with English . These touches emphasize that English was not yet a dominant language in the regions in which the story unfolds . Brown uses consistent semantics in his speech balloons ; the size and weight of the dialogue varies according to speech patterns , and sound effects vary according to how close they are to the reader .

Brown 's drawing style had always changed from project to project . He frequently cited Harold Gray of Little Orphan Annie as the primary influence on the drawing style of Louis Riel ? restrained artwork which avoids extreme closeups , and blank @-@ eyed characters with large bodies , small heads , and oversized noses . Gray 's drawing and compositional style was well suited to the subject of Louis Riel . Gray often used his strip as a public platform for politics , and Louis Riel was also very public and outward @-@ looking . This approach is in great contrast to the inward @-@ looking comics Brown had previously been known for ? notably his autobiographical work . His cross @-@ hatching style was reminiscent of the editorial cartoonists of Riel 's time . Gray 's outdoor scenes were inspired by the Illinois plains of Gray 's youth , terrain similar to that of Manitoba and Saskatchewan .

Brown also acknowledges significant debts to Jack Jackson 's historical comics , Hergé 's The Adventures of Tintin , and the extremely exaggerated style of Larry Gonick 's Cartoon History of the Universe . He says he referred to Jack Hamm 's How to Draw Animals when drawing the horses that

appear frequently throughout the book , which were rendered running with their legs splayed , as an artist may have depicted them in the days before the influence of Eadweard Muybridge 's photographs of bodies in motion . Brown drew each of the 1325 panels separately on watercolour paper on a block of wood he placed on his lap in lieu of a drawing table , which allowed him seamlessly to rearrange , insert , and delete panels as he saw fit . The drawings were finished using both a thin ink brush (no larger than size 0) and dip pen with a Hunt 102 nib and black ink .

= = = Appendices = = =

When he began *Louis Riel* , Brown had increasingly been making use of notes and appendices in his work , beginning with his researching and annotating the 1994 comics essay , " My Mom was a Schizophrenic " . He added appendices to the 1998 collection of short strips , *The Little Man* , and the 2002 reprinting of *I Never Liked You* . In *Louis Riel* , the appendix totalled 23 pages , along with a bibliography and an index . Alan Moore 's use of extensive end notes in his and Eddie Campbell 's *From Hell* , another fictional reconstruction of a historical event , influenced Brown 's appendices . In the comics essay " *Dance of the Gull Catchers* " which closes the *From Hell* appendices , Moore metaphorically reveals to the reader the myriad choices he could have made from the available historical evidence when putting together his version of the Jack the Ripper story .

Allowing him to " tell the best story and tell the truth " , Brown 's notes were self @-@ reflexive , and drew attention to the artistic choices he made when putting together the book . Brown makes explicit the inaccuracies in the book , as when he realized his drawings of William McDougall did not match up with descriptions of him by biographers as a " portly " and " heavily built man " . Brown chose not to redraw McDougall 's scenes , deciding he " could live with that level of inaccuracy " . He also admits that he deliberately changed some of the historical details , as when he has Prime Minister Macdonald in talks with the Hudson 's Bay Company in London ? Macdonald was not in London at that time and did not directly participate in the negotiations . In other instances , Brown noted where he paid special care to historical details : the dialogue of *Riel* 's trial comes directly from court transcripts . Brown makes clear in his notes the amount of research undertaken for the book , emphasizing both its authenticity and his desire to show the different aspects of *Riel* 's ambiguous story . Many of his changes were made for space considerations , as he intended to limit the book to about two hundred pages .

The notes range from nearly insignificant details to major discrepancies and deliberate distortions . They have a self @-@ deprecatory tone that is common in North American comics , tracing its roots to the awkwardly self @-@ aware underground comix of the 1960s and 1970s . They also reveal Brown 's process in shaping the story from conflicting sources . He acknowledges some of the more capricious details . He explains he was not committed to the conspiracy theory he presented , but included it in order to present Macdonald in a certain light : " [V] illains are fun in a story " , he said , and he was " trying to tell this tale in an engaging manner " . He also included a " Major @-@ General Thomas Bland Strange " in an 1885 meeting at which the general was not actually present . Brown explains that he included Strange because he was amused by the Major @-@ General 's name .

= = Publication history = =

Brown originally meant *Louis Riel* to be published in book form , but his publisher , Chris Oliveros , convinced him to serialize it first . Drawn and Quarterly published the ten comic @-@ book instalments from 1999 until 2003 . Brown was granted CA \$ 6000 by the Canadian Council for the Arts in 2001 to assist in its completion . The full volume appeared in hardcover in 2003 and softcover in 2006 . The book sold out its first printing in two months , went through multiple printings , and had sold fifty thousand copies by the beginning of 2011 . The original serialization sold poorly , which made the book 's success a surprise .

The comic book and the collection both came with an extensive appendix , and the collection came with a bibliography and an index , all hand @-@ lettered by Brown . The collection 's appendix came

to 22 pages .

In the original serialization , as the series progressed the influence of Harold Gray became stronger . The characters ' heads became smaller while their bodies and hands grew larger , with Riel appearing " like the Hulk in a wool suit " after his hilltop religious revelation . Brown redrew many of the earlier drawings to make them consistent with the later ones in the collected edition . He added backgrounds , redrew , added or deleted panels to improve page rhythms or make chapter divisions cleaner , and reshaped or relettered word balloons . Dialogue remained intact for the most part , although the slur " frog " for the French @-@ speaking Métis was replaced with " half @-@ breed " .

In 2012 , Drawn and Quarterly first began offering comics in e @-@ book format , prompted in part by Brown . His *Louis Riel* and *Paying for It* were the first two books made available , though Brown is a print @-@ lover who professes little interest in e @-@ books , or computers in general . The non @-@ exclusive deal was made with Toronto @-@ based Kobo Inc . A tenth @-@ anniversary edition in 2013 included sketches and other supplemental material .

French and Italian editions appeared in 2004 ? the Italian from Coconino Press and the French from the Belgian publisher Casterman . To appeal to francophones in Europe , where Riel is not well known , Casterman had the book titled *Louis Riel : l'insurgé* (" Louis Riel : Rebel ") . The Montreal @-@ based publisher La Pastèque obtained the rights to the book and re @-@ released it as *Louis Riel* with a different cover in 2012 .

= = Reception and legacy = =

Though not the first work of biography in comics , *Louis Riel* was the first completed of its length and depth . The book sold well , and became the first graphic novel to reach Canada 's non @-@ fiction bestseller list . A critical and commercial success , it was especially popular with libraries and schools . Comics academic Jeet Heer states that it has perhaps sold more copies in Canada than any other graphic novel . Publishers Weekly called it " a strong contender for the best graphic novel ever " , Time magazine included it in its annual Best Comix list in 2003 , and , in 2009 , the Toronto Star placed it on its list of the ten best books of " The Century So Far " . It is regularly cited as being at the forefront of a trend in historical graphic novels , along with Art Spiegelman 's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi 's *Persepolis* .

Especially in Canada , *Louis Riel* brought Brown out of the fringes into the mainstream , and also attracted more serious attention to graphic novels . It was the first work of comics to receive a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts (although Brown 's libertarian politics have led him to condemn the government for handing out grants) , and helped pave the way for the Council 's special category for graphic novels . The book was optioned for a movie by Bruce McDonald and another film director , though the project never started filming .

Researching Riel had a significant impact on Brown 's thinking . When he started the book , he considered himself an anarchist . His intention was to write an anti @-@ government book , and had a bias in Riel 's favour ? despite what Brown considered Riel 's own political conservatism ? as Riel opposed the government . Over the course of drawing the book , he came to sympathize more with Macdonald . His reading led him in 1998 to *The Noblest Triumph : Property and Prosperity Through the Ages* by Tom Bethell , which led him change his own politics to favour libertarianism . He later ran for parliament as representative of the Libertarian Party of Canada , to the dismay of his friends . At one point , after Brown had started drawing the book , he tried to rewrite the script to reflect his changed perspective , but found it too difficult and stayed with the original script . He revealed his new beliefs only in the appendix .

Reviewer Dennis Duffy commended Brown 's research , but stated Brown " often cheats " in assigning forethought to Macdonald's action unattested in historical documents . Critic Rich Kreiner found that Brown 's disengaged approach to *Louis Riel* invited a reader @-@ response approach to reading it . As an example , it was the impetus for an in @-@ depth , three @-@ part interview conducted by Dave Sim in the pages of his comic book *Cerebus* , which Sim uses as an opportunity to apply his own idiosyncratic views to an interpretation of events in Brown 's book .

= = Adaptations = =

The Montreal @-@ based RustWerk ReFinery using puppetry adaptated the book as Louis Riel : A Comic @-@ Strip Stage Play . It was set to début in early 2016 .

= = = Awards = = =

= = = = Books = = = =

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