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Louis Riel – The Rediscovered Hero

In the present day and age of technical progress: television, mobile phones and Internet – problems concerning history seem to be outdated. History, as an academic discipline, is swept away from the centre of attention: it does not contain simple or practical advice for solving current problems, neither does it teach how to avoid them, nor does it supply attractive examples for young generation. As a school subject, history is not popular either. Canada is not an exception in this respect – such problems occur there, too. A survey carried out by the Dominion Institute proves that 76% of Canadian teachers are embarrassed by the lack of historical knowledge among Canadian students: 32% of Canadian young people are unable to specify the date of Canadian Confederation, only 54% of Canadians could identify Canada's first Prime Minister and 44% of them think D-Day marks the bombing of Pearl Harbour (The Dominion; Granatstein, 19-50).

After the 20th century experience, history was perceived as a legalised tool used by the authority and by various political trends for indoctrination, manipulation, intensification of conflicts and sustaining myths (*Pamięć*, 13). Historians themselves discuss the problems of the loss of their influence or even of the end of history as an academic discipline (*Pamięć*, 212-13). At the same time, however – which is a kind of paradox – in many spheres of life there are references to the memory and the past. There is also some interest in various sections of history: especially the mysterious or controversial ones, those which give reasons for some feeling of pride or, on the contrary, those which evoke some sense of guilt for the deeds of ancestors. There is also some specific “heritage industry” related to recalling and commemorating anniversaries and displaying the places of historical interest. Museums, exhibitions illustrating the past or historical heritage parks, allowing for the observation of everyday life of the past, enjoy permanent popularity. In Canada, it is worthwhile to mention Midland (the reconstruction of a Jesuit mission of St. Marie), Fort Edmonton, military forts (for example Kingston or Fort Henry), and especially Upper Canada Village (a living heritage park reconstructing the atmosphere of a small settlement from the mid-19th century).

Some historic personalities also enjoy great interest. The reasons for their popularity are varied. On the one hand, even the smallest details concerning their victories or successes or historic events which they created or in which they took part are carefully studied; on the other – the weaknesses and faults of famous persons are scrutinised and exposed. The aim of such research is to facilitate the knowledge and understanding of such persons or to take them from the pedestal, which closes the gap between the heroes and average people. Also simple, human curiosity plays a significant role here. This is evidenced by the popularity of biographies, memoirs, letters and interviews. Readers look there for mysteries, interesting facts and sensations. Heroes are also needed as permanent symbols. The values and ideals which they believed in (in some cases also the ones only ascribed to them) are used by politicians for propaganda, and by teachers for didactic purposes. Such methods are meant to help to create the unity of a society, nation or a state.

According to the popular opinion, the Canadians do not like historic heroes, so they do not have any (Daniel, 113-127). This opinion concerns in particular the Canadians who are related to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, but can be referred to entire Canada. The history of this country was developing in an evolutionary way: with no decisive wars or revolutions from which heroic personalities often originate. In the history of Canada, there are strong ethnic and regional divisions. This is a history of conflicts and compromises: first between the French and the English, at the same time, between the Natives and non-Natives. Since the mid-19th century, such a structure has overlapped with the tensions between the privileged groups and newcomers, also between the dwellers of urban centres and regions far from cities, in some other dimensions – between the employers and employees. Northrop Frye claimed that Canada is a country in which courage matters very much, yet this did not create charismatic leaders or heroes. It seems however that the problem of the lack of heroes results mainly from the diversification of the Canadian society and its varied, frequently opposite historic experiences. It is difficult to find historic persons symbolising all Canadians and at least accepted by the majority of them. With respect to this, the attitude of Canadians to the heroes of the past is quite specific. The heroism of the *coureurs de bois* (runners of the woods), CPR railroad constructors or the explorers who were the first to reach distant and unknown regions is underestimated. It is not the courage of the discoverers that is stressed, but rather the profits which they gained from their risky expeditions. Contemporary research, and in particular, the analysis of documents,

demythologise such persons as Adam Dollard des Orneaux (Finkel, 73) or Madeleine de Verchères (Finkel, 107). The values of the martyrdom such as those of Father Jean de Brébeuf (Finkel, 81) and Ursuline Jean Mance seem to be too anachronical to the contemporaries. The followers of reforms and the leader of the rebellions of 1837-38, William Lyon Mackenzie and Louis Joseph Papineau are accused of the lack of courage and too hasty escapes to the United States (Francis, 115; *The Canadian*, 156). Famous commanders – Louis-Joseph de Montcalm and James Wolf were the incomers from Europe, weakly tied to the Canadian soil, thus they symbolise the struggle of the French against the English rather than reconciliation (Bumsted, 71-72). The heroes of the First and the Second World War spilt their blood away from Canada, so their deeds do not possess an entirely Canadian dimension. The example of Billy Bishop shows also that some heroic deeds were overrated¹. A popular Prime Minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who introduced in October 1970 the War Measure Act, used military forces against his countrymen, and the people of Quebec still cannot forgive him this action. Doctor Frederic Banting² and Terry Fox³ are the persons who are respected in contemporary times. Their achievements, however, have some universal, not exclusively Canadian, dimension.

A particular place in the pantheon of Canadian heroes belongs to Louis Riel – a mysterious and interesting person. Riel was a Métis. He was born in 1844 in the settlement of St. Boniface upon the Red River, in a French-speaking Catholic family. Riel's mother came from Quebec and his father was an influential person in the Métis community in the Red River Valley. His education⁴ as well as his organisational talent allowed Riel, as if automatically, to become the Métis leader. He commanded them in the moment of Canada's taking over the Red River Valley and North-West Territories from the Hudson Bay Company. Disoriented Métis people organised in 1869 a rebellion, created the National Committee (a form of government) and took over the power in the region of Fort Garry. As a result of complicated, yet effective, negotiations with the authorities in Ottawa, the Province of Manitoba was created and incorporated into the Dominion.

¹ For example his solo attack on a German aeroplane in June 1917 is questioned, as it was not confirmed by witnesses (Francis, 122-124).

² A member of the group which invented insulin in 1922 (*Continuity*, 181).

³ In 1980 he initiated a "Marathon of Hope" which helped him to raise money and generate publicity for cancer research (*Continuity*, 322).

⁴ He started but never completed his studies in Montreal.

The leaders of the movement were, however, put on trial⁵ and Riel was sent to exile. After suffering from mental breakdown, he left for USA and finally settled in Montana. In 1885, however, he came back to the territory of today's Saskatchewan, to support a new protest of the Métis demanding the right to land. The events, however, took a different course than in 1870. Fights broke out. The authorities in Ottawa did not take up negotiations with the temporary government proclaimed on the prairies. Riel – disappointed with the lack of support on the part of the Roman Catholic Church and suffering from another mental breakdown – proclaimed himself a prophet of the Church of the New World. After two months Indian and Métis troops were defeated and the group of the rebellion leaders was taken to trial. L. Riel surrendered hoping that in the court he would have the chance to present the problems and arguments of the Métis community. He rejected the line of defence suggesting that he was insane. In a hasty trial in Regina he was sentenced to death. The authorities, in spite of their hesitation, did not use the right to pardon and ordered the sentence to be executed (Stanley 1979, 20-23).

The execution led to political tensions in Quebec, where it was condemned. The students of Laval University in Montreal reacted very strongly. The outrage was seen in the cities and settlements which were reached by the news of the result of the trial. As many as 50 thousand people took part in the demonstration of protest organised in Montreal (Lester, 144). The organisers of the demonstration seemed not to remember that also two French-speaking battalions took part in the suppression of the Métis rebellion in 1885 (Braz, 71). The leaders of the French Canadians interpreted the events on the prairies as a proof of the Anglo-Saxon Protestant fanatic attitude, which was regarded as a threat to the people of Quebec. The execution was treated as an excuse to raise accusations against Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald and his party. As a consequence, the support for the Conservative Party decreased and the Parti National emerged, representing the interests of the French Canadians (Lester, 146-149). L. Riel became a symbol of the persecution of the French Canadians and – somehow paradoxically – considering the considerable distancing of the Church hierarchy – of the believers of the Roman Catholic faith. Such an image survived in Quebec, and in the second half of the 20th century it was even strengthened. In French publications and literature Riel is presented

⁵ On the charge of the death of Thomas Scott, the only victim of the riots.

as a victim, mainly because of his French ancestors, language and religion. He was not however, treated as a brother, but rather as a friend, whose defeat was a humiliation for Quebec (Braz, 71). A dispute over Riel's execution changed into a dispute over the relationship between the Francophone and Anglo-Saxon communities and it was presented as such in written publications of the Quebec nationalism, coming to life at that time (Flanagan, 5).

The atmosphere in the English-language provinces, especially in Ontario, was entirely different. Riel was despised. After his execution, his portraits were burned in public (Francis, 113). The troops which took part in suppressing the rebellion were greeted with enthusiasm. The participants of the fights were given rewards, lands and medals. Even those who were not involved in the fights were awarded. In Winnipeg, Toronto and Halifax public parades were organised (gen. Frederic Middleton got a twenty thousand dollars bonus from the federal government). For the Indians and the defeated Métis community Riel became a martyr and hero, but the stories about him and the events of 1869-1870 and 1885 were transmitted mainly in an oral form. The Anglo-Saxons, even those who defended Riel, "regarded him as cruel and insane" (Bumsted, 246). Official publications in English presented the Métis leader as a symbol of primitive, medieval Catholicism, hostile to the development of Canada and to its progress. In the English-speaking Canada, there were attempts to remove Riel from the collective memory and to erase or minimise the significance of his deeds.

The first serious academic works about the events on the Canadian prairies, by George F. Stanley, were written as late as at the end of the 1930s. The majority of the copies of the book's edition, together with the typed original version were destroyed in London during the Second World War. The text, reconstructed by its author, was not re-published in Canada until 1961. In this publication and in many others relating to the history of the Canadian prairies, G. Stanley treated Riel critically, with a reserve and with no sympathy. He stated that Riel was not "a great man; he was not even a near great. Nevertheless he became, in death, one of the decisive figures of [Canadian] history [...]" (Stanley 1960, iii-v). Stanley repeated, in a way, the opinions that L. Riel represented primitive people fighting against progress. He strongly emphasised Riel's illness and admitted that Riel is a significant person for the Métis⁶.

⁶ It is worth noting that he consistently wrote this word with a small "m".

In the second half of the 20th century the opinions about Riel began to change. After the Second World War, he was presented as the martyr of Canadian Confederation and the victim of the conflicts between the Francophone and Anglo-Saxon communities. Since the 1960s, this forgotten and mysterious person attracted the interest of men of letters and fictions writers (among others, Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood) and poets. Jean-Robert Rémillard in one of his poems even calls Riel a saint [Saint-Louis – de Batoch – Riel-sur-Oubliance] (Braz, 192). The celebrations of Canada's centennial and new historical analyses written for this occasion supported the interest in Riel. He was one of the few persons symbolising the development of Canada and the incorporation of the prairies to this country. He obtained significance on more than a local scale and became a figure important for the whole country. Riel biography was in certain ways transformed and became a Canadian hero and patriot. He symbolised all the representatives of the First Nations, and gradually was recognized as a mediator between the persons of different races, religions and ethnic groups. Also the evaluation of the events of 1869-70 and 1885 underwent some evolution. First, it was presented as a necessary movement (necessary revolution) which was meant to make the White community aware that they entered the land that belonged to somebody else (Braz, 91-92). The Métis obtained the role of the intermediaries between the white world and culture and the world of their own community. The Métis leader was a natural symbol of this connection (Braz, 91-117). He became the hero of many novels, poems, theatre plays, films and also two operas. L. Riel was also honoured in a European way: his monuments were erected in Regina and Winnipeg. The artistic form and location of these monuments were, however, controversial and incited many discussions. The representatives of the Métis communities strongly objected against their neglect during discussions and celebrations.

Riel became a very popular figure in the mid-80s of the 20th century. In relation to the 100th anniversary of the 1885 events, thanks to the project of Canada Council and with the participation of historians from several Canadian universities, a monumental, five-volume edition of all Riel's works (pamphlets, speeches, letters and poems) was prepared (Braz, 231). Only few persons in the history of Canada were honoured in such a way. Moreover, historians are still looking for unknown texts written by Riel; the news about his farewell letter to the editor's office of the *Citizen* magazine, discovered in 2003, and a diary ascribed to Riel, were published on the front pages and met with great attention of Canadians (Fadden; Diary).

Some politicians supported the above mentioned actions using it to improve their own images, gain popularity and the votes of the Canadian electorate – mostly of Indian origin (Braz, 139). Such gestures and statements cannot be, however, regarded as pure opportunism. They combine the elements of political correctness, multicultural policy and the activity for the benefit of the minorities and an attempt to compensate for the Native community. A former Prime Minister, Joe Clark, in one of his official speeches said, for example, that Canada “should show respect to the today’s Métis by officially recognizing the unique and historical role of Louis Riel, as the founder of Manitoba and his contribution to the development of Confederation” (Braz, 13). Adrienne Clarkson, Canada’s Governor General (Chinese by origin) in her inauguration speech, delivered on 16th November 1999, emphasised Riel’s role as the first leader of the reformatory movement as essential in the opening of the Canadian West. His actions, according to the Governor General, laid the foundations for the development of the minority rights and for the co-operation between the communities belonging to different cultures in Canada (Braz, 13). Since the 1970s many groups in the Canadian Parliament have undertaken the attempts of exoneration of Riel and waiving the judgement for treason. Legal procedures used by the Parliament (the resolution was approved without formal voting) did not satisfy the Indian and Métis communities. Also the representatives of Quebec protested against the resolution. In 1994-97 Bloc Québécois parliamentary members many times submitted private members’ bills concerning the recognition of the role of L. Riel and his rehabilitation. Such initiatives were critically evaluated by some Métis organisations which represented the attitude that Riel was innocent and therefore does not require any clearing of the charges or any pardon. They demanded the compensation for of all the harm and granting the Métis the rights to land (Flanagan, 167-189).

An unusual “new” trial of Riel took place in October 2002. It was organised by the Dominion Institute – an organisation popularising the knowledge of Canadian history. The “trial” was carried out in front of the CBC cameras. The roles of the prosecutor, defence counsel, judge and Riel himself were acted out by eminent lawyers. The staged performance met with great enthusiasm. In the Internet vote 86.7% viewers voted for the acquittal of the legendary Métis patron, and the defence counsel promised to apply to Ottawa for the annulment of the judgement. This television “trial”, even before the broadcast was strongly criticised by the leaders of Métis organisations for “subverting the facts”, “correcting history” and disrespect for their nation. (The Trial; Żurek, 12-13).

The example described above shows clearly that the problems related to Riel's activity, his execution and the outcomes of the late 19th century events still draw the attention of Canadians and create vivid emotions. L. Riel is an unusual historical figure whose complexity of actions has been understood and interpreted in many various ways, frequently contradicting one another. Louis Riel is, at the same time "a sage and a madman; a Catholic mystic, French-Canadian and Catholic martyr and Anabaptist visionary; he is a Canadian hero, although he acted against Canada, he is used as a symbol of Canadian unity, although, at the same time, of the persecution of the Québécois; he is also a Métis nationalist and Aboriginal hero. It can be regarded as paradoxical that the memory of Riel was practically "Canadianised", as if taken over, or – to be precise – taken away by the descendants of the English-speaking people of Canada, originally hostile to him, who now even try to conceal the fact that their hero did not speak English.

The phenomenon of Riel indicates that some historical characters are still meaningful and important for the contemporary Canadians. The references to their personalities raise many discussions (Ferguson, 128-134; Kientez, 15) and can influence artists and writers. The biographies of such persons, or fragments of their biographies are often selectively treated and used in the cultural discourse to create particular symbols for national identification. The contemporaries, however, emphasise only these elements and aspects of the biographies of national heroes which refer to the current problems and require coming to terms with the past or can be applied in politics or propaganda. This creates also some great challenge. Teachers and academics do not only have to teach basic knowledge of the past and search for new, attractive methods of presenting it. They should also quickly respond to particular interests with regard to some blank spaces in history. On the one hand it is necessary to present a wide context of the phenomena and processes evoking the interest, and on the other – to verify, with reference to source documents, the interpretations or facts which create myths or oversimplifications. It is also necessary to speak out in order to clarify, in front of the widest public possible, all the cases of exaggeration, anesthetisation, modification, concealment or false interpretation of the past and adopting it to the current needs. Sometimes fulfilling all these tasks is very difficult. It seems, however, that such actions as well as diligent and complex approach to history, creates proper atmosphere for the contemporaries to get to know the past and adequately use the experience of historical events.

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