

The “Louis Riel Song”: A Perspective

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The following account of the song, which, among a cluster of titles, came to be known simply as the “Louis Riel Song”, reflects my growing awareness, over some thirty years, of its origins. Although its story could be told from other viewpoints, I believe the approach adopted here aids in understanding the song’s significance, especially for some Métis people in Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Those in Western and Central Canada who were interested in folksong traditions took special notice when, in 1963, Barbara Cass-Beggs published a song supposed to have been written, in prison, by Louis Riel. In 1957, Joseph Gaspard Jeannotte, an elderly Métis, had recorded the song for her in the Qu’Appelle Valley community of Lebret, Saskatchewan. Writing of the occasion, Ms. Cass-Beggs noted: “We drank a toast to [Riel’s] memory before the song was sung.” Such was the veneration accorded Louis Riel and this song.

Unfortunately the tape recording of the song did not produce a clear text. Ms. Cass-Beggs’ 1963 publications (*Eight Songs of Saskatchewan* and the Folkways LP *Folksongs of Saskatchewan*) contained Father Rufin Turcotte’s transcription of Jeannotte’s French lyrics as they had been recorded on the original tape.

In 1967, when Ms. Cass-Beggs published *Seven Métis Songs of Saskatchewan*, a number of changes appeared in the song’s text. For example, the first stanza of the 1963 text had read as follows:

C’est au chantier bataille,
J’ai fait cri’ mes douleurs
Vou’ est ’cun dout’ surpasse,
Ça fait frémir les coeurs.

This passage was replaced in 1967 by the following:

C’est au champ de bataille,
J’ai fait écri’ douleurs.
On couche sur la paille
Ça fait frémir les coeurs.

Since then, the second text has become the standard, appearing in four other song books: three by Edith Fowke (*More Folk Songs of Canada*, 1967; *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs*, 1973; and *Singing Our History*,

1984) as well as Ms. Cass-Beggs' 1975 book of *Canadian Folk Songs for the Young*.¹

Twenty years after Ms. Cass-Beggs' recording of M. Jeannotte, Lucinda Clemens re-recorded Jeannotte singing many of the songs he had already recorded with Ms. Cass-Beggs. Her transcription of Jeannotte's version of the "Louis Riel song" begins as follows (in the notes to Clemens' Astro recording *Une chanson de vérité*):

De tous champs de bataille
 J'ai fait crier mes douleurs.
 Ouais! qu'aucun doute se passe
 Ça fait frémir les coeurs!

These three texts, all issuing from the same singer, show how hard it is to achieve agreement on words and phrases in regional speech, in this case, Michif French. Lyrics are stretched and shrunk on the frame of a tune and passed through electronic equipment. Another factor preventing undistorted communication arises when a singer of limited literacy is unable to write down or spell a word which is unclear to the collector. As well, a singer may misremember or change a song, as might have happened when the very elderly Jeannotte sang for Ms. Clemens.

Over the years the "Louis Riel Song" has been given a variety of titles, possibly resulting in confusion and most certainly presenting quite a problem for cataloguers. The title is sometimes given in French, sometimes in English, and at others in both languages: "Chanson de Riel" — "Song of Louis Riel," "Chanson de Louis Riel/The Song of Louis Riel," "Riel's Farewell," and "L'adieu de Riel/ Riel's Farewell." Using just first lines as titles for these published versions would have produced fully three different listings for this song, all based on the singing of a single informant, M. Jeannotte.

While the Jeannotte song held the attention of Anglo-Canadian folksong publishers, a francophone collector recorded a variant from another Métis who also strongly associated it with Louis Riel. In 1969, M. Henri Létourneau recorded Mme. Jean Rosalie Lafrenière in Ste. François-Xavier, Manitoba. On Létourneau's tape, Mme. Lafrenière's variant is titled according to its first line: "Sur le champ de bataille." In introducing the song on his documentary tape, M. Létourneau referred to the song as "la chanson de Louis Riel." Discussions with a person who knows both the singer and the collector indicate they shared the belief that the song was by Riel. The story is broadly the same as in Jeannotte's variant, ending similarly with four lines that accept the inevitability of death and express a preference for dying bravely.

A third singer of the song came to my attention in the fall of 1986 when I was lucky enough to hear it on CBC/AM Radio sung by Joseph Arthur Venne of Birtle, Manitoba. M. Venne had made a cassette recording of the

“Louis Riel Song” in 1984, and this recording was used for the radio broadcast. Like the other two singers, M. Venne asserted that the song was “by Louis Riel.” His first four lines, conflating the first eight lines of the other two texts, were as follows:

Dans le champ de bataille
C’tait crimes et douleurs.
Mai j’ai- reçu une lettre
De ma chère maman.

M. Venne’s song tells broadly the same story as the others. Remarkably, his last four lines differ from Jeannotte’s in only one expression. The speaker in Venne’s version says he wants to die bravely, while in Jeannotte’s the speaker says he would rather die bravely, a subtle difference. Mme. Lafrenière’s text coincides with Jeannotte’s only in the final two lines. The penultimate lines of all three texts are quite similar:

Jeannotte: J’aim’ mieux mourir en brave
Lafrenière: J’aime mieux mourir en brave
Venne: Je veux mourir en brave

Below I consider the significance of the general similarity of these Métis texts.

With regard to the context of recording, M. Venne differs from the other two singers. Both M. Jeannotte and Mme. Lafrenière were sought out by people who wanted to record them, whereas M. Venne prepared tapes to tell others about his songs. Joe Venne was active at meetings of the Manitoba Métis Federation and may have intended the tapes to be used at such gatherings. He was in a sense a publisher of the “Louis Riel Song”. On a tape he prepared to share the song he begins with these words:

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a lot of you here that don’t know too much about our great leader of the Métis people a hundred years ago. That was Louis Riel. Well, here is a song by Louis Riel. I will sing it to you in French and explain it to you in English so that you will get the meaning of the song.

M. Venne felt a very close connection with the song — and through the song, with Louis Riel. He learned it as a young child from his uncle, Pat Bellehumeur. Patrice Bellehumeur, born in the Métis community of St. François-Xavier in 1863, was a younger brother of Marguerite Monet dit Bellehumeur, wife of Louis Riel. That is, Joe Venne learned the song from Louis Riel’s brother-in-law.

In the mid-1980s I had my first hint that the song was known in the Maritimes. Two Acadian folklorists from New Brunswick, Charlotte Cormier and Donald Deschênes, were visiting Vancouver. Still unsatisfied with the unclear Jeannotte text, I asked them to listen to Cass-Beggs’ recording. They immediately recognized it as a variant of a song published in the *Chansons d’Acadie* of Father Anselme Chiasson and Brother Daniel

Boudreau (4me série, 1978). There it was titled “La lettre de sang.” The question of the song’s origin was thus raised: Had the “Louis Riel song” originated in the West, or had it been brought there from the East? The song indeed had a strong Riel connection in many people’s minds, not only in the consciousness of the three Métis singers, but also in the minds of English-language folksong scholars and those who read their publications. This new title, “La lettre de sang,” “The Letter of Blood,” now directed attention to the larger corpus of French-language folk songs. Nonetheless, wherever the song’s origin was to be located by further research, the folkloric belief in Riel’s authorship had to be acknowledged as important in itself.

The greatest resource for research into French Canadian folk song is Laval University’s Archives de Folklore. Songs in Laval’s Archives are indexed in several volumes of Conrad Laforte’s *Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française* (1977-87). “La lettre de sang” is listed under the thematic heading “N. L’ennui et les messages.” and is labeled “N-20” on pages 533-35. Laforte’s catalogue lists 56 examples collected in eight provinces and two northeastern states. I have examined nearly half of these plus two others—29 texts in all.

Sorting these variants in the hope of gaining a clear indication of the song’s movement, I identified thirteen narrative elements or motifs present in five or more texts. All elements but three followed the basic story line; the three exceptions concerned death and usually appeared in the first two stanzas. Here are a few general observations:

1. In all 29 texts, the narrator “cuts himself with a knife or sword” and writes a “letter of blood.”
2. In 28, the narrator is either “on a battlefield” or envisions a battlefield.
3. In 20, the narrator says he “does not want to live enslaved.” This element does not appear in the Métis texts.
4. 25 texts assert that “death comes to us all someday.” This element appears in all the Métis texts.
5. In 21, none of them Métis, the narrator is prepared “to die for his country.”
6. In only 5, 3 of them Métis, the narrator “desires to die bravely.”
7. In 6, none of them Métis, the story begins with the narrator unhappily contemplating the prospect of life in prison.

Eleven of the elements appear in 17 texts; 2 of the Métis texts have 9, and the other has 10. (The median is 11.) The references to death appear early in 15 texts, but in 10 others, including all the Métis variants, they appear at the end of the song. That there was an earlier version of the song may be inferred from the fact that 6 of the texts begin with the narrator’s thoughts on incarceration, before (in all but one of these), proceeding to “the battlefield”.

From the foregoing it is reasonable to conclude that a slightly fuller song with a strong patriotic element gave birth to a variant taken to the Métis society in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. The three Métis texts have much in common and form a distinct group. Louis Riel may have brought the song west after his sojourn in Quebec. Whatever actually happened in the song's travels, the Métis variants have a continuing significance as a testimony to the commitment and bravery of Louis Riel.

NOTE

1. In her note on "Riel's Farewell" in the 1984 publication, Edith Fowke gives Thomas Flanagan's opinion that the "Louis Riel Song" was not made by Riel. Flanagan inferred this by studying Riel's known song compositions, and observing that this song was not in his style. Dr. Fowke, reflecting the notion that the song was of Métis origin, suggested that "it is more probable that it was composed by one of (Riel's) followers using a traditional pattern and an old French tune." Barbara Cass-Beggs' English-language text, given alongside the Jeannotte text and using the title "Song of Louis Riel," is not a translation of the French text. Using story elements from Jeannotte's version, and basing her understanding of the song's significance on her contact with him, Ms. Cass-Beggs apparently remade the story to encompass this Métis singer's feeling for Riel. In her English lyrics we are made to hear Riel's heroic voice.

Sommaire: *Philip J. Thomas rend compte de différentes versions de la "chanson de Louis Riel," depuis l'enregistrement commercial et la parution du livre de Barbara Cass-Beggs (1963) jusqu'au début des années 80 alors qu'il l'entendait chantée par Joe Venne sur les ondes de CBC-AM; selon Donald Deschênes et Charlotte Cormier, cette chanson serait une variante de "Lettre de sang" connue dans l'ensemble du Canada français. Thomas compare les thèmes de 29 interprétations de cette chanson afin d'en mieux saisir l'histoire de sa migration (cf. l'article de Deschênes plus haut).*