

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Lawrence Clarke: Agent Provocateur

Canadian historians have largely ignored Lawrence Clarke's role as the provocateur of the war of 1885. Current historians do not even give mention to Clarke's activities that led to the fight between the Metis and the police at Duck Lake. George F. Stanley, perhaps the best-known and certainly the most prestigious authority on the 1885 rebellion, relegated Lawrence Clarke's part in it to a mere footnote.<sup>1</sup> However, some early historians recognized that Lawrence Clarke was the man who, for whatever reason, actually started the war between the Metis and the government forces in the Northwest. Norman F. Black, who published a history of the 1885 rebellion in 1913, certainly recognized Lawrence Clarke as the man who provoked the war.<sup>2</sup> However, Black did not attempt to examine either Clarke's motives or the rewards associated with initiating the conflict.

In this chapter, we retrace Lawrence Clarke's activities as they related to the initiation of the war in the Northwest and examine the chain of events that led directly to the Metis uprising of March 26, 1885. For many years before the uprising, the Metis had petitioned the federal government to grant them title to the lands they occupied along the Saskatchewan River. By the early spring of 1884, it had become apparent to the Metis that the federal government would not listen to them, nor would it act upon their often-repeated requests. In desperation, the Metis council voted to send a delegation to Montana to plead with Louis Riel to return to his people and take their case to the federal government.

Among the men chosen to go to Montana was a Scots Halfbreed named J. Isbister, a man who had served the HBC for many years. Despite his loyal service to the company, however, Isbister was sympathetic to the plight of the Metis and remained loyal to their cause throughout the entire conflict. In this he was not alone. The Metis were also supported by a large number of poor European farmers under the leadership of Dr. Andrew Porter and William Henry Jackson.

As well, the Conservative clique of speculators in Prince Albert, under the leadership of Lawrence Clarke, was actively, though surreptitiously, supporting the movement for his return. But unlike Jackson and the poor European



farmers, whose support for the Metis was both principled and genuine, the Clarke clique supported Riel's return hypocritically and opportunistically. They simply wanted to use Riel as a scapegoat. With Riel back in the country, the war that they needed as a means of returning prosperity to the Northwest could be easily engineered. One local writer who witnessed many of the events leading to the return of Louis Riel described the intrigue this way:

As Ottawa appeared unmoved by all these declamations, the thoughts of all turned to Riel. It was resolved to ask him to come to Saskatchewan and give them the advantage of his weight and experience. This scheme, if it did not originate with the white people, at least had their secret approval. One of those delegates to visit Riel in his Montana home — he was a Scotch Halfbreed, J. Isbister, an old Hudson's Bay man — not satisfied with *sub rosa* backing, would not leave till he had obtained from a very prominent person, a letter giving some sort of authorization for the mission.<sup>3</sup>

Further information indicated that Lawrence Clarke was the man identified as the "prominent person" who visited with J. Isbister:

The tradition persists that Lawrence Clarke was an active sympathizer with the early stages of the rebellion. The matter was discussed in the press in May 1885. Isbister said that he went straight from the meeting which decided to call Riel, to Lawrence Clarke, and that Clarke had said that there will have to be a rebellion. Clarke later admitted the visit but claimed that he had turned Isbister out of his office with indignation at his design to bring Riel in.<sup>4</sup>

While Clarke was secretly supporting the movement to bring Riel to Prince Albert, he was at the same time advising various federal government officials that the Metis were preparing for a rebellion. It was one of Clarke's letters, written in May 1884, that was used by the prime minister to justify his use of troops against the Metis of the Northwest. In this letter, Clarke informed the government that certain European and Metis radicals were going to bring Louis Riel back to the Northwest. He informed Macdonald that these radicals were holding secret meetings which, he claimed, posed a serious threat to the security of the country. On May 11, 1884, Clarke sent this telegram to Lieutenant Governor Edgar Dewdney:

A series of meetings have been held at which only [Metis] were allowed to be present. All were sworn to secrecy as to what transpired. But everything has been divulged. Object was to pass resolutions complaining of their treatment by the Government. Grievances imaginary, such as having to pay for entering home-  
stead . Two [Metis] appointed to interview Riel asking him to assist them if he could not come to advise them what to do.<sup>5</sup>



Clarke was playing off one side against the other. Even as he advised the prime minister and the lieutenant governor that a Metis insurrection was brewing, he went about the country quietly supporting Riel's return to the Northwest, hoping that he could be used to stir up the Metis and provoke them into an armed conflict with the federal forces.

The Metis and the poor farmers of the Prince Albert region could not afford to turn down donations from any source if they were to be successful in their efforts to bring Riel and his family back. The Metis were still living in a subsistence economy as workers for the rapidly shrinking fur-trading operations of the HBC. They must have welcomed the money received from the Clarke clique.

While Clarke and his associates planned to set Riel up as a scapegoat, the poor people of the region — the Metis in particular — genuinely needed Riel as their spokesman and lobbyist with the federal government. The Metis and the leaders of the popular movement drew up a letter to Riel at the Lindsay District School House on May 6, 1884. The letter was delivered to Riel in Montana in early June by Gabriel Dumont and J. Isbister. It indicated that a union was developing between the English-speaking settlers of the region and the Metis, a union which was also attempting to involve the Indians of the Northwest. Members of the Popular Movement felt that the only thing required to bring this union about was the presence of Louis Riel. The letter concluded:

Now, my dear cousin, the closest union exists between the French and English and the Indians, and we have good Generals to foster it; . . . the whole race is calling for you.<sup>6</sup>

This optimistic letter from a proud but desperate people had its desired effect. Riel gave up his peaceful life as a school teacher in Montana to return to the turbulent Northwest as the political spokesman for the people of the Prince Albert region.

During the time that Riel lived in Montana he seemed to have forgotten his mission of establishing a Catholic sanctuary in the Canadian Northwest. This sanctuary was to be a haven for not only the French-Catholic Metis, but also for other dispossessed Catholics of the world, including the Irish, who were being cruelly persecuted in Europe.

The letter, delivered by the highly respected Gabriel Dumont, rekindled the holy fires still smoldering in Riel's soul. He decided to attempt to fulfill his mission once again. On their arrival at St. Laurent the triumphant party was greeted with an enthusiastic and emotional Metis welcome. Shortly after his arrival in St. Laurent, Riel was invited to a dinner party at the Jackson home in Prince Albert. During the meal an unexpected visitor arrived at the door:



Lawrence Clarke entered with a twenty dollar donation for Louis Riel. He greeted his surprised hosts:

How is the movement coming on? Here is \$20.00 for Riel's keep. Bring on your rebellion as soon as you can. It will be the making of this country.<sup>7</sup>

It was not long, however, before Clarke began to feel some disappointment with Riel. Instead of militance, Riel was offering diplomacy. Instead of anger, patience. Instead of fostering rebellion, Riel espoused moderation in his drive for unity, justice and peace. In fact, by August 1884, Riel was enjoying popular support from not only the Metis, but also the Indians and European settlers. With Riel and Jackson working together, it looked, for a short period of time, as though reason and justice might prevail.

In the months that followed his return from Montana, Riel continued to attract members of the Popular Movement to his side. Initially, even Father André was disposed to praise Riel's diplomacy and moderate approach to the problems imposed upon the people by the federal government's policies for the Northwest. Riel was even invited to speak at a meeting in Prince Albert, where his moderate tone won over most of the crowd. Nevertheless, his popular support came, in the main, from the mixed bloods and poor farmers of the region. Riel and young William Henry Jackson were soon engaged in a series of public meetings throughout the countryside. Everywhere they went, they were well-received by the farmers and the Natives. As the movement grew, police surveillance was stepped up.

The Indian agents reported on these proceedings regularly through the Department of Indian Affairs. Their messages were consistent, indicating that the Indians were still peacefully disposed, and that Riel's return had created a calming effect on them.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the police felt that a regular spy should be employed to watch the Metis. But the individual police officers were too well-known locally to do the job, and strangers would not be taken into confidence by Riel or the members of the Popular Movement. Chief Indian Agent J. Ansdell Macrae addressed this problem in August, 1884, in a letter to Prime Minister Macdonald. Macrae claimed that some citizens were considering moving east if repressive measures were not adopted by the government to control Riel and the activities of the Popular Movement. He informed the prime minister that several spies had been employed to watch these malcontents:

I would beg to be permitted to suggest that it might be well to employ a man solely for the purpose of watching and reporting the intentions and designs of both the [Metis] and the Indians. In the meantime with the arrangements made, it is thought that their movements will be known, and followed out, with as much accuracy as is possible without incurring some slight expense. L. Clarke, Esquire, a priest and one



or two Indians are reporting and have promised to report what they can learn; but there are strong reasons for receiving with the greatest of caution what all, save the former may impart.<sup>9</sup>

Although there is no record of Clarke's having been formally hired as a spy, Macrae's message to the prime minister was clear: Lawrence Clarke was reporting on the movements of the Metis. Indeed, he was deemed to be the only informant who could be trusted. Evidently, Clarke's messages to the government authorities were being listened to and acted upon: Captain Chambers of the NWMP reported that "the Police, in response to the fear that the Indians might mobilize and join the new political movement increased the strength of the Northern division by two hundred men. Many of the new arrivals were quartered in Fort Carlton, the Hudson's Bay Company post supervised by Lawrence Clarke."<sup>10</sup>

All the Indian agents who were reporting were sending messages to the Macdonald government indicating that the Indians were not planning military action. The only person giving contrary information was Lawrence Clarke. Clarke's activities were paying off: The HBC was making considerable profit by quartering the additional two hundred men in Fort Carlton. Meanwhile, the police buildup and the officers' negative reactions to the meetings which Riel staged began to have a strong effect on him. Before the police buildup at Fort Carlton began, Riel had taken a very moderate approach to the question of Metis land claims. He had continued the program of petitions to the government while publicly emphasizing cooperation and unity among the various ethnic groups of the Northwest.

During the fall of 1884, rumours began to spread through the Metis communities that the police were going to attempt to take Riel by force. These rumours resulted in a renewed militance among the Metis. Added to the difficult conditions the Metis lived under, these rumours acted as a catalyst for militant organization. This increased militance began to drive some of the more moderate Halfbreed and European people away from the Popular Movement. In the face of Ottawa's continued silence regarding recent Metis petitions, the increased police activity in the region took on ominous proportions. Small wonder that the Metis increased their own efforts to organize. As rumours of imminent arrests circulated throughout the Metis communities, Riel became more militant. The Metis people were slowly coming to the realization that Ottawa was planning a military campaign against them.

At a Metis political meeting at St. Laurent on December 23, 1884, a rumour spread through the crowd that the police were going to break up the gathering and arrest Riel. Sergeant Gagnon of the NWMP reported that it took less than half an hour after the rumour was circulated for the Metis to gather over one hundred armed men for Riel's protection. As a result of this



incident the police knew that any attempt to take Riel by force would result in an armed confrontation with the Metis.<sup>11</sup>

As a result of recurring rumours concerning Riel's arrest, coupled with the negative reaction of the police to the meetings being held, the Metis political movement for responsible government began to develop a more militant stance. Riel and his followers had little to celebrate as the New Year dawned. Riel began to realize that Ottawa would never enter into serious negotiations with him concerning either Metis land claims or responsible government in the Northwest. Consequently, he began to focus his activities around the Bill of Rights, a document drawn up to convince the federal government that the North West Territories should be made into a province and given responsible government. If federal authorities accepted the document it would ensure Metis rights along with those of the other citizens of the proposed new province. Drawing up the Bill of Rights was essentially the work of William Henry Jackson. It did, however, have the blessing and full support of Riel and Dumont. Nearly all of Riel's peaceful agitation now focussed around the drive to have the Bill of Rights adopted locally and presented formally to the federal government in Ottawa.

The Bill of Rights was drawn up in late November, 1884. It did not contain militant rhetoric, but simply asked for responsible government for the Northwest. It asked for provincial status, for schools and hospitals, and that Metis land claims be settled. As well, it asked that arrangements be made for the Indians through some form of welfare.<sup>12</sup> The Bill of Rights became the focal point for a series of meetings held throughout the Metis communities during the next few months. It received wide support among the Halfbreeds and European settlers in the region, but this support gradually fell away during January and February, 1885, when the *Prince Albert Times* launched a campaign against it. The newspaper suddenly and inexplicably executed an abrupt about-face in its political leanings. It had initially printed stories that were favourable to both Riel and the Popular Movement. But the Popular Movement was now aligning itself with the Liberal opposition in Ottawa and the *Prince Albert Times* suddenly became vehemently anti-Riel and anti-reform, printing articles calling for martial law and an end to all agitation.<sup>13</sup> The letter, from Lieutenant Governor Dewdney to Prime Minister Macdonald explains the newspaper's sudden turnabout:

I forgot I told you that I have arranged to secure the Prince Albert paper, so if any little patronage can be sent them from below it would be appreciated.<sup>14</sup>

The Conservative government's system of patronage in the North West Territories thus extended even to the local newspaper. And if the sudden turnaround in the *Prince Albert Times* was any indication, the patronage system was paying off handsomely. Despite the actions of the press, however,



Riel and Jackson continued to organize around the Bill of Rights, and Riel adopted it as a major policy statement. It was forwarded to the secretary of state in Ottawa in December, 1884. On January 27, 1885, Jackson received acknowledgement that the secretary of state had received the Bill of Rights. On the same date, Jackson wrote to Riel:

It is evident that they [officials of the federal government] are prepared to communicate with us on something like equal terms.<sup>15</sup>

To offset the propaganda campaign launched by the Prince Albert newspaper and to convince Ottawa that the Bill of Rights had wide support, Riel and his supporters circulated a petition among the Metis demanding local responsible government. Jackson was now confident that the government would be receptive, and Riel and Jackson began discussing sending either a delegation or an emissary to Ottawa with the petition.

Sergeant Gagnon of the NWMP had been keeping a watchful eye on these proceedings. He had been under the impression that the Bill of Rights and the petition had been sent to Ottawa together. However, in mid-January, 1885, Gagnon was informed otherwise. He wrote to his superior officer, informing him that the Popular Movement had planned to send a courier to Ottawa in February to present the petition. He said that the courier would act as a diplomat and bargain for the demands contained in the Bill of Rights.<sup>16</sup>

However, William Henry Jackson's belief that the federal government was now willing to deal with Riel and himself on equal terms was ill-founded. Sir John A. Macdonald evidently had no intention of entering into serious diplomatic discussions with either Jackson or Riel. Instead, a government plot was underway. The prime minister's intentions after he received the Bill of Rights in December, 1884, were clear. The demands of the people in the Northwest were not to be met. The prime minister did not bring the Bill of Rights to the attention of Parliament. Indeed, Sir John denied ever receiving it. He stood up in Parliament and solemnly declared:

The Bill of Rights has never been officially or indeed in any way promulgated so far as we know, and transmitted to the government.<sup>17</sup>

The Bill of Rights had of course been received and acknowledged by the secretary of state and forwarded to the British Colonial Office.<sup>18</sup>

After the December meetings were over and the Bill of Rights had been mailed to Ottawa, Riel began to seriously contemplate his return to the United States. He must have recognized that Ottawa would not negotiate in a serious manner with the people of the North West Territories as long as he remained in the region. In fact, Jackson had been warned that he must break his alliance with the Metis leader if he hoped to attain responsible government



in the Northwest.<sup>19</sup> It is likely that Jackson discussed all of these matters with Riel. His faith in Riel and his loyalty to the Metis chief never wavered. The warnings that had been given Jackson were borne out by the campaign that was being launched by the press against Riel. By the end of 1884, Riel was being described by the press as a madman who was leading the Metis astray.<sup>20</sup> Jackson was also maligned by the press and his mental status too was questioned.

Just before Christmas, 1884, the North West Council member for the District of Lorne, Mr. D. MacDowall, along with Father André, visited Riel and discussed with him a “financial settlement” for his leaving the country. It is likely that Riel did enter into negotiations with them. By this time he knew that he had done all that he could towards establishing a peaceful and just settlement in the West. Since his presence was now working against further progress, why should he not tend to his own financial affairs and return to his life as a teacher in Montana? MacDowall wrote to Lieutenant Governor Dewdney, discussing the prospect of procuring bribe money for the purpose of removing Riel from the country. He indicated that, during the meeting of December 27 with Father André and Louis Riel, the following prices were discussed:

Riel’s claim for property lost in Red River during 1870 amounted to the larger sum of \$100,000, but he will take \$35,000 . . . and I believe myself that \$3,000 to \$5,000 would cart the whole Riel family across the border.<sup>21</sup>

Riel was amenable to the proposition put before him, provided that sufficient funds were involved. André informed Lieutenant Governor Dewdney:

Riel has among the [Metis] a great power which he may turn to good or evil, according to how we use him. Now he seems willing to put all the influence he enjoys on the side of the government, if he gets the help he requires; he asks \$30,000 as a first installment, but obtain for him \$4,000 or \$5,000 and I am bold in saying Mr. MacDowall and I will make him agree to any condition, but in duty bound I am obliged to say that it would be better to concede him that amount than to keep him in the country. I know that if Riel is satisfied, all the [Metis] will be united in the next election, and, as a man, they will vote for Mr. MacDowall, and we will carry everything before us; so I strongly recommend you to use all your influence at Ottawa to obtain for Riel that sum; if things are settled satisfactorily, we will not hear much of Riel after that, for he desires to go back to Montana.<sup>22</sup>

This communication was passed on to Sir John A. Macdonald, who, strangely, did not act on the suggestion to pay off Riel, as he had done during the 1870 conflict to induce Riel to remain outside Canada.<sup>23</sup>