

# REMINISCENCES OF A BUNGLE

BY ONE OF THE BUNGLERS



Edited by R.C. Macleod

## Reminiscences of a Bungle

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edited and with an introduction by R.C. Macleod

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of a Bungle  
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One of the Bunglers  
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For Elaine  
who knows that I eventually get things right

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## INTRODUCTION

The motives that drive men to record their experiences are almost infinitely varied and complex. Leaving aside those who describe events professionally—journalists and writers of all manner of official reports make up the great bulk of this group—the rest fall into two broad categories; those who write because they are convinced of their personal uniqueness and those who write because they are ordinary people who have participated in extraordinary events. The accounts of the 1885 rebellion in this volume clearly belong in the latter group. They are vastly different from the diary of William Lyon Mackenzie King or the countless other political and literary memoirs that fill library shelves. These are the words of modest individuals who, had they not been uprooted from their daily routines and marched off to war, would certainly not have committed any part of their lives to paper. The two for whom biographical information is available, Ord and Cassels, lived interesting and productive lives for half a century after 1885 and never wrote another work. Cassels even went out of his way to avoid appearing in print.

Ord, Cassels, and Rusden all began to record their experiences the moment they decided to participate in the rebellion. *Reminiscences of a Bungle* and *Notes on the Suppression of the Northwest Insurrection*, although written after the fact, are quite apparently based on diaries. The day-by-day structure and the

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amount of detail devoted to the joining up, getting organized, and travelling to the scene of the fighting make this a certainty. Clearly the sense of taking part in unique and important events, of making history, is the primary motivating factor in these accounts. Fear of death in battle and the accompanying desire to leave some memorial behind do not seem to have figured largely for any of the three. Each saw it rather as the adventure of a lifetime, not to be forgotten in later years when memory might prove false. "I am very lucky to have the chance to go," Cassels wrote, "change is pleasant and one is sure to see something worth seeing." Ord and Rusden were wary of official and journalistic versions of events and sought to set the record straight. Rusden's papers contain a copy of Middleton's dispatch summarizing the campaign that appeared in the *London Gazette* on 7 August 1885. There is a marginal note in Rusden's handwriting: "General Middleton's dispatch is in many places entirely wrong as in many cases the troops were not placed in the position stated in his dispatch."<sup>1</sup>

The theme of war as adventure is, of course, persistent in military literature throughout the ages. Even in a conflict as squalid and unpopular as the Viet Nam war, there were many volunteers attracted by the prospect of danger and excitement in an exotic location. Interestingly, none of the three accounts in this volume shows any evidence that patriotism was an important reason for enlisting. Ord, Cassels, and Rusden did not see themselves as defending the Canadian way of life nor did they consider the rebellion a serious threat to

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the integrity of the country. The Indians and Métis were in their eyes, a rather contemptible lot. The government had mismanaged the native population to the point of revolt and it was the diarist's good fortune in each case to have the opportunity to see the West at public expense while helping to administer the necessary chastisement. The justice of the cause was never in doubt but the cause was a thoroughly Victorian conception of the majestic and inevitable progress of civilization rather than Canadian nationalism or manifest destiny.

The theme of disillusionment in the later parts of the diaries is almost as pervasive as that of adventure at the beginning. Initial anticipation and enthusiasm are rapidly eroded by boredom, bad food, and the death and mutilation of friends. War, as always, turned out to be mostly endless red tape, guard duty in the cold and wet, and mile after mile of apparently aimless marching. "It was not the sort of fighting we expected at all," Rusden said, unwittingly echoing the soldier's complaint since the beginning of organized warfare. There is disillusionment, too, with the leadership. Brought up on a steady diet of Anglophilia and countless reminders of British military prowess, Canadians expected a standard of perfection in the art of war that no mortal could have achieved, much less the British commander of the Canadian militia, General Middleton. The streets in Ontario towns named after Napoleonic or Crimean war battles, popular literature of the *Boy's Own Paper* variety, and newspaper accounts of distant victories in India

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or the Sudan conveyed nothing of the inevitable waste, confusion, and misery of war. The reality of the campaign, mild though it was by the standards of most wars, quickly eliminated much of the supposed glory for the participants and made them examine their experience with new and critical eyes. Middleton's pomposity and ill-concealed distrust of Canadians did nothing to improve the situation. Some Canadians like Charles A. Boulton, who had professional experience in the British army, were less inclined to make harsh judgments. In his autobiographical account, *Reminiscences of the North-West Rebellions*, Boulton praises Middleton's performance. The standard British army textbook on how to deal with minor colonial insurrections, Colonel C.E. Callwell's *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, published in 1899, also refers to Middleton's leadership in favorable terms.<sup>2</sup>

## II

The Northwest Rebellion was a very minor affair compared to the mass slaughters of the twentieth century. Total casualties for both sides amounted to about 110 dead and perhaps 300 wounded. Barely thirty years later, well within the active lifetimes of the diarists in this volume, the Canadian army would lose 7,000 men in a single day in the assault on Vimy Ridge and count it a victory lightly won. But even compared with the other small colonial conflicts that

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abounded in the nineteenth century, this was a modest war, indeed. It lacked the uninhibited ferocity that too often characterized those clashes between widely different cultures. The reader who looks for the sort of atrocities on both sides that occurred during the Indian Mutiny, the Zulu War, or the conflicts in the American West will be disappointed. The 1885 rebellion was a modest and moderate kind of war, a very Canadian affair in all respects.

The rebellion had its origin in the plight of the Métis people living in the Saskatchewan River valley in the early 1880s. The Métis were a unique people, a cultural group distinct from both the European and native stocks from which they sprang.<sup>3</sup> A product of the peculiar social and economic circumstances of the Canadian fur trade, both the livelihood and group identity of the Métis were defined by their relations with the fur companies until the 1860s. The settlement at Red River was their metropolis and cultural center. There they had begun to practice, to some degree by the middle of the nineteenth century, a rudimentary agriculture on their long, narrow farms stretching back from the banks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers. The mainstay of their economy, however, and the primary focus of their yearly cycle remained the buffalo hunt. The market for the produce of the hunt was the Hudson's Bay Company, which needed tons of pemmican each year to maintain its scattered posts in the fur-rich but food-poor North.

From a global or even a continental perspective the fur trade economy of the Canadian West was rapidly



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becoming a marginal endeavor by the 1860s. The trade in beaver pelts, for almost two centuries the only economically viable export of the region, was about to be displaced by a new staple product with drastic consequences for the Métis. The Métis were not, like their Indian cousins, totally without means of effectively responding to the coming revolution that large-scale agricultural settlement would bring. The Roman Catholic church at Red River, in particular, had foreseen the inevitability of change and had taken what steps it could to prepare its Métis adherents. Farming had been encouraged and some of the more promising Métis youth had been educated beyond minimum levels of literacy.

Among the latter group was Louis Riel, the individual whose personality was to dominate the Canadian West from 1869 to 1885. Louis Riel, aged twenty-five in 1869, first demonstrated his abilities by leading the resistance at Red River to the transfer of the Hudson's Bay Company's territories to Canada. All negotiations for the transfer had taken place in London without any thought of consulting the inhabitants of the region. The Métis, understandably, were not prepared to take the Canadian government on trust. Their successful resistance and subsequent negotiation of terms of entry with the Canadian government was a remarkably intelligent and skilful exercise in leadership by Riel. The Métis achieved their aims almost without bloodshed and saw their demands embodied in the Manitoba Act of 1870.

Although armed conflict was averted in 1870, the larger problem of increasing economic marginality for

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the Métis was less easily solved. They had been given 1.4 million acres of land, initially in the immediate vicinity of Red River Settlement, under the terms of the Manitoba Act. Within a few years, partly because the Métis showed no inclination to set up farms away from the river banks on the allotted blocs of land, and partly because the government wanted the land for incoming settlers, the system was changed. Under the new plan, each eligible Métis was given scrip entitling him to choose a farm anywhere in Manitoba or the Northwest Territories. The scrip, which was negotiable, quickly passed into the hands of white traders for small sums in cash or goods. Most of the Métis drifted west and north to the area around the junction of the North and South Saskatchewan rivers. Here it was easier to pursue the diminishing buffalo herds. Here, also, there was unoccupied river bank land on which to establish the traditional Quebec-style farms. In the new communities of St. Laurent and Batoche, the Métis were able to postpone their confrontation with the nineteenth century for another decade.

The leader who had made possible this reprieve was less fortunate than his people for the next decade and a half. Excluded from the general amnesty granted to participants in the uprising, Riel was forced to flee to the United States. This marked the beginning of his semi-permanent exile, which ended with his death on the Regina gallows in 1885. The stress of living in constant fear of arrest or assassination, combined with repeated expulsions from his seat in Parliament, finally began to affect Riel's mental balance.

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His friends and relatives were forced to commit him to an asylum where he remained for two years before recovering sufficiently to be released.

From 1880 onward Riel lived in Montana, and was marginally associated with the substantial community of Métis buffalo hunters who had drifted south of the border to pursue the rapidly vanishing beasts. Although he became an American citizen in 1883 and took an active part in Montana politics, Riel remained faithful to his people north of the border. Employment as a school teacher at a Catholic mission along with his marriage and the birth of his two children seem to have merely postponed Riel's effort to put into practice his grand design for the Métis. In his years of exile, Riel had elaborated a vision of the future in which the Métis were to be the new "chosen people," selected by God to redeem the world.<sup>4</sup> They would form the core of an independent theocratic republic in the Northwest. There were too few mixed-bloods to form a purely Métis nation, but Riel believed his vision could be accomplished by incorporating the Indians as well as selected immigrants from the Catholic countries of Europe.

An effort by Riel in 1879-80 to organize a native confederacy as a first step in his plan had failed.<sup>5</sup> He also canvassed for support among the Fenian Brotherhood in the United States without success. But if opportunity was lacking, the dream remained, and an increasingly concrete and elaborate sense of mission dominated Riel's thought during his last years. In June of 1884, when a delegation from Batoche arrived to

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invite him back to lead the Métis in a new confrontation with the Canadian government, Riel was not surprised. He was convinced that through him the destiny of his people would finally be fulfilled.

The ferment in the valley of the Saskatchewan that led to Riel's invitation had been brewing since the beginning of the decade. All three of the groups that made up the population of the area were seriously discontented by 1884. The Plains Cree bands, many of whom had accepted the treaty signed in 1876 with great reluctance, were, three years later, beginning to feel the full impact of the disappearance of the buffalo. The Indian Affairs department was obligated to provide food in time of need under the terms of both Treaties Six and Seven, which encompassed most of the southern prairies. How much food and on what terms, however, remained at the discretion of the government. After some years of allowing the situation to drift, the government found itself facing dangerously large numbers—up to 7000—of half-starved Indians congregating around the Mounted Police post at Fort Walsh in the Cypress Hills. Here, within striking distance of the few remaining buffalo herds south of the 49th parallel, the Indians clung grimly to the remnants of their traditional way of life, subsisting on the minimal rations doled out by the police.

The most important Cree leaders who held out, Big Bear, Little Pine, and Piapot, were not just stubborn old men clinging blindly to the past. They had all recognized early in the 1870s that their people would have to change and that agriculture represented