

12. Louis Riel and Sitting Bull's Sioux: Three Lost Letters (2007)

David G. McCrady

Three little-known letters addressed by Louis Riel to the commanding officer of Fort Assiniboine in March of 1880 afford us a glimpse into the 'political Riel,' who was trying to secure the removal of Sitting Bull's Sioux from the Canadian-American borderlands in order to strengthen his own position as recognized leader of the Métis community in Montana. From his strictly American stance, Riel places much blame on the Mounted Police.

In 1985, a major documentary project culminated in *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel*, a publication intended to collect and edit all of Riel's known works. As is generally the case in projects of this scope, some writings were overlooked or unknown at the time of publication.¹ Three important letters of Riel's came to my attention when I was researching 19th-century Sioux-Métis relations in the Canadian-American borderlands.² A draft of one of the three appears in *The Collected Writings*, but the other two have not been published previously. Dated in March 1880, the three were written to Lieutenant Colonel Henry Moore Black, the commanding officer of Fort Assiniboine, at his request. The United States Army had established the post in 1879 primarily to patrol the Canadian-American boundary and prevent unwanted incursions by Canadian Indians and Métis into American territory, but also to keep watch over Sitting Bull's "hostile" Sioux, who had fled to Canada following the Custer fight on the Little Bighorn in June 1876. Riel had gone to Fort Assiniboine to talk to Black about the Sioux, and Black had asked him to put this information in writing. Today, these three letters are located in the records of the United States Army's Adjutant General's Office at the U.S. National Archives in Washington, DC.³

The basic events of Louis Riel's political career are well known. The leader of the Red River Resistance of 1869–70, Riel argued the case of the Red River settlers who opposed the unilateral sale of Rupert's Land to Canada and negotiated the creation of the Province of Manitoba. Exiled for his participation in these events, and the execution of Thomas Scott in particular, Riel lived for several years in the eastern United States before moving to Montana in 1879. In June 1884, the Saskatchewan Métis invited him to come north and speak on their behalf to Canadian government officials. Riel attempted to recreate his success of fifteen years earlier, but his North-West Rebellion failed and he was hanged in Regina in November 1885 for treason.

We eagerly accept Riel's return to the Canadian North-West as a "homecoming," but, by the mid-1880s, Riel's home was Montana. His involvement in local politics, his attempts to secure land grants for the Montana Métis, his marriage in Carroll, Montana, to Marguerite Monet *dit* Bellehumeur (herself a migrant from Manitoba), his decision to become an American citizen in 1883, his work as a school teacher at St Peter's Mission and, as we shall see, his negotiations with the Sioux, all point to his incorporation into the Montana Métis community. While the years Riel spent in the United States are discussed in the literature, his biographers have tended to look more to the events of his life that took place on the Canadian side of the Canadian-American boundary.⁴

During the winter of 1879–80, Louis Riel was living on the Fort Belknap Reservation, home to the Gros Ventres and Upper Assiniboines and one of the last refuges of the buffalo herds. No doubt the Métis had been invited to hunt on the reservation as many of them had relatives among the Gros Ventres and Assiniboines. They were not alone. Several thousand Aboriginal people from Canada, where the herds had failed completely in the autumn of 1879, had come south to hunt, as had Sitting Bull's Sioux. Sitting Bull and other Sioux leaders had taken some 3,000 followers north to Canada in the aftermath of the Great Sioux War and now, with the buffalo virtually extinct north of the boundary, many were travelling south to hunt.

Always the politician, Riel saw the issue of the Sioux refugees as an opportunity to advance the interests of the Montana Métis. Riel spent the winter of 1879–80 along the Missouri River trying to convince refugee Sioux leaders to surrender to American authorities. In this endeavour, he was motivated by two complementary goals: his concerns for Métis sustenance, and his hope of deflecting US authorities from evicting the Métis from the Fort Belknap Reservation. The Montana Métis, along with their Gros Ventre and Assiniboine kin, were competing with Sioux hunters for the same diminishing herds. Convincing Sioux leaders to surrender to American

authorities would remove hungry Sioux mouths from Montana to reservations further down the Missouri River in Dakota Territory. In addition, by helping to “bring in” Sitting Bull, Riel hoped to curry favour with the United States Army, which was charged with removing squatters, such as the Métis, from Indian reservations.

The two heretofore unpublished letters that Riel wrote to Black speak of his attempts to convince Bull Dog, the leader of fifty-seven lodges, perhaps some 300 people, to surrender. They offer glimpses into Riel’s larger strategy to remove all of Sitting Bull’s Sioux from the Canadian-American borderlands and help position Riel as a leader of the Métis community in Montana.

Riel arrived at Fort Assiniboine on March 18, 1880 and informed Black of his discussions with Bull Dog and his chief soldier, Red Elk. They had been forced by hunger to come south of the boundary to hunt and took the opportunity to ask Riel to find out on their behalf what terms the Americans would grant their people if they surrendered. American policy was to disarm and dehorse any Sioux who wished to surrender. Riel argued against this policy, claiming that “The moral effect” of leniency “would enivitably [*sic*] be to bring in all the Titons [Tetons, an alternate name for the Western, or Lakota Sioux] and Sitting Bull himself in the course of a few weeks.”⁵

As symbols of their intentions, Bull Dog and Red Elk gave Riel a pipe and a knife to give to Black. But, not having instructions from Washington to deviate from standard policy, Black could not accept the gifts. He told Riel to inform Bull Dog and Red Elk that the surrender had to be unconditional. Talks then broke down.

These three letters also refer to Sitting Bull, whom Riel met in late January 1880. Two rather dubious accounts of that meeting survive. One was written by Jean L’Heureux, an enigmatic Canadian who lived with Crowfoot’s Blackfoot band in the 1860s and 1870s and who was on the government payroll as an interpreter in the 1880s.⁶ According to L’Heureux, Riel’s discussions with Sitting Bull revolved around a plan to gain support from Canadian Indians for a general uprising in the Northwest. According to the plan, the Métis would capture two North-West Mounted Police posts—Wood Mountain Post and Fort Walsh—and the European settlement of Battleford (then the capital of the North-West Territories). They and the Blackfoot would together take the police force’s Fort Macleod. After this, Riel was to proclaim a provisional government and argue the Aboriginal people’s case to the Canadian government. “‘Sitting Bull’ and all American hostile Indians were to be invited to join, with promises of plunder and horses.”⁷

A similar account, supposedly in Crowfoot’s words, parallels this story.

When asked whether Riel had ever asked him to join in revolt, he said, "Yes; over in Montana in the winter of 1879 or the spring of 1880. He wanted me to join with all the Sioux, and Crees, and half-breeds. The idea was to have a general uprising and capture the North-West, and hold it for the Indian race and the Métis. We were to meet at Tiger Hills, in Montana; we were to have a government of our own. I refused, but the others were willing; and then they reported that already some of the English forts had been captured. This was a lie. Riel took [Plains Cree leader] Little Pine's treaty paper [i.e., his printed copy of Treaty 6] and trampled it under his foot, and said we should get a better treaty from him. Riel came also to trade with us, and I told my people to trade with him, but not to listen to his words. Riel said he had a mighty power behind him in the east."⁸

The story that Louis Riel hoped Sitting Bull would join him in an invasion of Western Canada was accepted by the official historian of the North-West Mounted Police, John Peter Turner, in the 1950s. It has appeared from time to time since, and in its most abbreviated retellings historians note Riel's attempts to form an Indian-Métis confederacy without specifically naming the Sioux.⁹ This story provides a misleading account of the relationship between the Montana Métis and Sitting Bull's Sioux. Whatever Riel's intentions were with respect to Canadian Indians, he did not intend forming any alliance with the Sioux. In December 1879, Commissioner James Macleod learned from a North-West Mounted Police mail-carrier that Riel had forged an agreement with Native leaders along the Milk River, granting both the Métis and Native people access to the herds on both sides of the boundary. Significantly, the mail carrier told Macleod that the proposed agreement specifically did not include the Sioux.¹⁰

Edward Lambert, a mixed-blood who worked as an interpreter for the North-West Mounted Police until July 1879 and who then became a trader among the Sioux, reported a far more convincing account of Sitting Bull's and Riel's conversation. In February 1880, Lambert returned from trading among the Sioux and informed North-West Mounted Policeman L.N.F. Crozier that Riel had offered to intercede on Sitting Bull's behalf with the American government. "Keep the peace and do not get yourselves between two fires until Spring at any rate," Riel had supposedly told Sitting Bull. "If you want then to go back and live in peace with the Americans I will see the President and arrange everything for you."¹¹

Sitting Bull turned down Riel's offer. Instead, he chose to work out an arrangement with James Morrow Walsh of the North-West Mounted Police to have Walsh communicate with the Americans on his behalf. Sitting Bull asked Walsh in May 1880 to tell the Queen and the American president that

he was ready to make peace with the Americans. He indicated that he wanted to go to Ottawa to meet the "White Mother's daughter" (one of Queen Victoria's daughters, Princess Louise, was married to the Marquess of Lorne, then Canada's governor general) and then to Washington to meet the president.¹² In the end, Riel was unable to convince any Sioux leader to surrender to the Americans. Bull Dog did not surrender to American forces at Fort Keogh until the spring of 1881. Sitting Bull followed suit in July.

Riel blamed his failure on the "underworking influence of the Canadian Mounted Police," and not without some cause.¹³ While official Canadian policy was to use persuasion to encourage the Sioux to surrender to American authorities, relationships between individual rank-and-file policemen and the Sioux were more complicated. Some half-dozen Mounties were married to Sioux women, while others had casual liaisons with them. One police deserter, Charles Thompson, lived in the Sioux camps, "adopted Indian habits even to the extent of wearing the breech clout and paint," and had one or more Sioux wives.¹⁴ American army commentators complained of surreptitious visits by police to Sioux camps on American territory and that various policemen used their influence to convince the Sioux to remain in Canada. Some indicated that the policemen were working on behalf of traders at Wood Mountain who did not want the Sioux to surrender as that would deprive them of their greatest customers.¹⁵

More than any other Mountie, Riel blamed James Morrow Walsh. "That officer of the Canadian Police," Riel wrote, "takes advantage of the presence of Titons around him, both to gratify his national pretension that the English are good to Indians while the Americans are not; and to exaggerate [*sic*] his personal usefulness in the Northwest."¹⁶ Walsh was rumoured to have been involved with various Sioux women, and to have wanted to put Sitting Bull on exhibit in eastern cities (just as Buffalo Bill Cody did, in fact, do later).¹⁷ The Canadian government, including the prime minister, shared Riel's view that Walsh was manipulating the situation for his own benefit and, to end his contact with Sitting Bull, forced him to return to eastern Canada on "sick leave" in July 1880.

When stringing together the pieces of Louis Riel's life, historians tend to focus on the events that transpired in Canada. These letters, brief glimpses into Riel's attempts to negotiate the removal of the Sioux from the borderlands, reveal that the decade Riel spent in the United States deserves more attention. When he headed to Saskatchewan in 1884, Riel told the Métis that he hoped to return to the United States by September.¹⁸ His intention was to remain awhile and then go home, and there is no reason not to believe him.

The Letters

1. *Louis Riel to Henry Moore Black, Fort Assiniboine, March 16, 1880*
Fort Assiniboine, March 16th 1880.

Colonel H.M. Black.

Colonel,

according [to] your wish, I have informed the Metis hunters of the Big Bend of Milk River, that you requested them to leave the [Fort Belknap] indian reservation, as soon as possible; and without any delay which would necessitate further action from the government. Their answer is this: they thank you for having stated their condition last fall, to your superiors; they acknowledge that your true and kind representations have helped them a great deal; and that the government have been very liberal towards them and that they have conferred a great favor on their children, on their families and on themselves, in allowing them (the Metis hunters) to winter at the Big Bend of Milk River.

Having no other way of acknowledging efficiently such a favor, those metis have exerted themselves during the whole winter to pacify the hostile Sioux; Sitting Bull himself and all his band; they have prepared, as much as they have been able to do it, those indians to change and to become friendly: The fact is that the most part of the hostile Titons do now regret the bad reception they have given to Bishop Martin,¹⁹ and it may be just to suppose that, if Sitting Bull himself had not been falsely advised on the other side of the boundary line, he would not have been so obstinate,²⁰ and I have the honor to inform you, colonel, that in compliance with your request, the greater part of the hunters who have wintered at the Big Bend, have already dispersed. Some of them have gone north of the Boundary line. A greater number of them are going south of the Missouri.

Those who have not yet left, will also go away, as soon as their too poor horses will have become strong enough.

I know six or seven cases of sickness amongst those who are yet in their wintering place, at the Big Bend. And if any one remains there a little later than you have [a] right to expect, I have not doubt, it will be on that account.

I have the honor

to be,

Colonel,

Your humble and obedient serv[ant].

Louis Riel.

2. *Louis Riel to Henry Moore Black, Fort Assiniboine, March 18, 1880*

The "Bull Dog" chief of the Brulees Sioux²¹ and his first soldier "Red Elk" send the Calumet and Knife to fort Assinaboin and ask for peace.

What they ask for their fifty seven lodges they ask it for the whole camp.

They want to go back to their country and demand a reservation there.

They ask for provision, blankets etc and common ammuniion for small game.

They love their horses and arms.

But many of their horses have died and are now dying by disease.²² Good many others have been killed to be used as food; and they have sold another quantity of them.

What remains of their band of horses are perhaps hardly worth the trouble to be taken and sold by the government. as to their arms, they cannot make much use of them, for want of improved ammunition.

The Brulees seem to have been send [*sic*] forward by the others to feel the ground. Sitting Bull and the other chiefs are in council on frenchman's creek²³ and probably waiting for the answer which the government is expected to give to their brethren, the Brulees.

Would it not be good policy to receive the Brulees and grant liberally their demands and to extend the same advantages to the rest of the tribe?

A rejection of the demands of the Brulees would throw the whole camp back to their former hostile attitude.

If the demands are rejected, Sitting Bull and [*illegible and struck out*] the main part of the tribe will, it is reported, go and plant their lodges along the lakes of the Northwest, to live on fish, whence small parties of war, traveling at night will very likely continue, in spite of any force, to infest Montana by horse-stealing and by murdering.

Would it not be better to bring the whole tribe at once, as there are chances to do it now, under the control of the government? Sitting Bull and the others could be treated liberally and at the same time watched very closely.

A gift of provisions at the present moment would go far to win them all completely.

A liberal gift and the granting of their demands would not cost half as much as an expedition against them.

Another consideration seems to be in favor of such a policy: on account of the absolute desappearance of Buffalo in the British Northwest, the British indians have already begun to make irruption on our indian reservations and in other sections of this territory. We do not know how and when that irruption of the english indians will end.

Would it not be well to take advantage of the ouvertures of the Brulees, to do away with Sitting Bull and his tribe.

I have the honor

to be,

colonel,

Your obedient serv[ant].

Louis Riel

Fort Assinaboin

March 18th 1880.

3. *Louis Riel to Henry Moore Black, Fort Assiniboine, March 18, 1880*

fort Assinaboin. March 18th 1880

Colonel H.M. Black

Colonel,

The Sioux of Sitting Bull are presently gathering at or near "Mud House"²⁴ on frenchman's creek with the good intention of smoking, as they say, the tobacco of Peace with the americans, if possible.

The Brulés, a party of fifty seven lodges amongst them have entrusted me with a pipe and a knife which I bring, in their name, to you as to commanding officer of this post: the pipe is a demand of reconciliation and the knife a mark that they want no more fighting with the americans. At the same time they address the government through you; and they say: give us good reservations on our lands which you have conquered. We wish to go back thither, because we love our native soil.

Give us some provisions, blankets and some of the other things that we want, because we are poorer than ever.

Give us shot and balls to hunt our small games: a few cartridges to kill a Buffalo once in a while, so that we may take, in peace again, meals out of that good flesh and enjoy its taste.

Do not take from us the horses and the arms that we have.

We want you to feel good in seing [seeing] this pipe and this knife: take them: if you take them, it will be the way to prove that you are going to act with us, according [to] our demands.

Colonel, when the chief of the Brules, named "Bull Dog" and his first soldier "Red Elk" charged me to convey thus their wishes to you, they appeared to be confident that you would receive their pipe and their knife and that the government would not reject their demands.

The Brulés seem to have been sent forward by the whole tribe to feel the ground. and I believe the camp of Sitting Bull are only waiting to see the result.

If I dare express any opinion about it, I think it would be good policy to receive the Brulés. and to grant liberally their demands. The moral effect would enevitably be to bring in all the Titons and sitting Bull himself in the course of a few weeks.

As they have sold many of their horses; as they are now eating many of them; as they have lost and are now loosing a quantity of their ponies by disease, I know that the Sioux of Sitting Bull have at this present time a comparatively small band of horses. and it would not be a very great advantage for the government to take their horses away from them as they propose to do.

Besides, the horse amongst the indians is a religious item, because a young man cannot get married, without giving a horse to the father of his bride.

as to their arms, they cannot make much use of them without ammunition. and the cartridges with which they had been supplied last fall and during December last, by the english trader at Wood Mountain have completely been spent and given away for provisions.

If the Brulés were refused, it would have a bad effect on the whole tribe. Small parties would no doubt surrender. But the brulk [bulk] of the camp would go over the boundary line and remain hostile. Good soldiers and brave officers would probably have no other success than the one of keeping them there.

I have been told that, if the government do not accept their demands, the Sioux intend to go and locate themselves along the lakes of the Northwest and there to subsist as long as long as possible on fish.

Meanwhile, small parties of war travelling only at night might in spite of any force continue to infest Montana, by horse stealing and possibly by murdering in the territory several of our pioneers.

For those reasons, it would also be a good policy, I think, to receive Sitting Bull as well as the other chiefs of the tribe.

Had he not been under the false and jealous influence of the Northwest Mounted Police, Sitting Bull would have undoubtedly come and made peace long ago.

The advantage of taking the ponies and the arms away from the Sioux is, in my humble opinion, not as great as the advantage of bringing Sitting Bull and his whole camp under the control of the government at once.

Disposed as they are now and taking advantage of the 57 Brulés lodges, the government can safely settle the "Sitting Bull" question. A present of some thousands dollars in provisions would reconcile all the Sioux of Sitting Bull without any exception and a gift of that kind with the granting



of their simple demands would not cost half as much as an expedition against them.

I have the honor
to be

Colonel
respectfully
Your obedient servant
Louis Riel

