

Student Paper Series: No. 35

**From Controversy to Celebration:
How the 1995 Relocation of Marcién Lemay's Riel from the Manitoba Legislature
to Saint Boniface Impacted Its Public Reception**

Sophie J. Sickert

2022

The Institute of Urban Studies



INSTITUTE OF
URBAN STUDIES

PUBLICATION DATA

Sickert, Sophie J.

From Controversy to Celebration: How the 1995 Relocation of Marcién Lemay's Riel from the Manitoba Legislature to Saint Boniface Impacted Its Public Reception

Student Paper 35

ISBN: 978-1-894858-22-9

I. The University of Winnipeg. Institute of Urban Studies. II. Title. III. Series: Student Paper (The University of Winnipeg, Institute of Urban Studies); 35.

This publication was funded by the Institute of Urban Studies but the views expressed are the personal views of the author. The Institute accepts no responsibility for them.

Published by:

Institute of Urban Studies
The University of Winnipeg
515 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 2E9

Institute of Urban Studies
©2022

The Institute of Urban Studies is an independent research arm of the University of Winnipeg. Since 1969, the IUS has been both an academic and an applied research centre, committed to examining urban development issues in a broad, non-partisan manner. The Institute examines inner city, environmental, Aboriginal and community development issues. In addition to its ongoing involvement in research, IUS brings in visiting scholars, hosts workshops, seminars and conferences, and acts in partnership with other organizations in the community to effect positive change.



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WINNIPEG

Institute of
Urban Studies



UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG

*From Controversy to Celebration:
How the 1995 Relocation of Marcién Lemay's Riel from the Manitoba Legislature to Saint
Boniface Impacted Its Public Reception*

This essay was written in partial fulfillment for the requirements of
HIST-7007/6-001 - History and Memory
Dr. Alexander Freund
Department of History

Sophie J Sickert
2022

In 1970, when the Manitoba government commissioned a statue of Louis Riel, one of Canada's most significant (and most contentious) historical figures, the public expected a certain level of controversy. Commemorating an Indigenous francophone leader who was executed in 1885 for rebelling against the Canadian government was bound to elicit a certain level of resistance. Few, however, anticipated that the memorial would remain a topic of intense debate for the next 25 years. Yet, after 1995 when the statue was moved approximately 2.5 km from the Manitoba legislative grounds to the neighbourhood of Saint Boniface, the controversy all but disappeared. The question therefore arises: Why was the statue seen as objectionable in its first location, but as a successful commemorative project in its second? I argue that the statue's relocation effectively changed how it was perceived by the public. This was achieved through a combination of changes to the statue's environment, such as primary audience, physical surroundings and context markers, and an evolution of how Riel was remembered over time. My analysis is largely based on publications by two Winnipeg-based newspapers: the English-language *Winnipeg Free Press* and the French *La Liberté*. In the first section I describe the circumstances that led to Riel's memorialization before analyzing why the sculpture failed as a commemoration on the legislative grounds and why it succeeded in Saint Boniface in the second and third sections. This case is of particular interest in the study of memory since it concerns the representation of an Indigenous hero, not a figure imposed by a conservative or colonial government like most 'statue wars'.¹ As such, it provides an unconventional explanation of why, to be widely accepted, commemorations must be sensitive to both time and place.

Louis Riel was a Métis political leader who played a key role in the Métis rebellions of the late 1800s. He was tried and executed for high treason for his actions on November 16th, 1885. As the leader of the Red River Settlement's provisional government, Riel negotiated the terms under which Manitoba was formally admitted to the Canadian confederation in 1870. Over the last 150 years, Riel's reputation has been notoriously polarized. He's been depicted as a hero, a traitor, a rebel, a Father of Confederation, a murderer, a religious fanatic, and a martyr among many other things. These differences in perception have made Riel one of the most written about historical figures in Canadian history.² It is Riel's ability to

¹ For discussions on more traditional statue wars see Kiera Lindsey and Mariko Smith, eds. "Statue Wars: Protest, Public Histories and Problematic Plinths," Special issue, *Public History Review* 28 (2021). Particularly Kiera Lindsey and Mariko Smith, "'Setting the Scene': Statue Wars and Ungrateful Citizens," *Public History Review* 28 (2021): 1-17.

² For example, Riel is the most written about historical figure in the *Canadian Historical Review*. M. Max Hamon, "Re-Presenting Riel: 100 Years in the Canadian Historical Review," *The Canadian historical review* 102, no. s1 (2021): s2.

represent disparate groups that has kept his memory relevant in the popular Canadian consciousness. In his analysis of Riel's status in popular culture, Donald Swainson writes that: "Louis Riel [has] become the ultimate Canadian example of the usable in history: he could be looked at in a seemingly infinite number of ways".³ In the 1960s and 1970s, provincial governments in the prairies began to capitalize on this widespread appeal.

Spurred on by the social revolution in the United States and increasing national autonomy from Britain, Canada began to reinvent its national identity in the 1960s. An inquiry by the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963 – 1969) opened a nationwide dialogue on the plural nature of language and culture in Canada, culminating with the adoption of an official multiculturalism policy in 1971. This shift in Canadian identity engendered a renewed interest in Riel and what he could symbolize for a modern Canada. By the early 1960s, Riel had become a symbol of biculturalism, a personification of what Canada was trying to become.⁴ Throughout the next two decades, scholarly attention on Louis Riel reached an all-time high.

The turn towards multiculturalism also paved the way for increased minority group mobilization, including Métis organizations.⁵ The Manitoba Métis Federation (MMF) for example, was founded in 1967 to provide governance on behalf of the Red River Métis and "to promote and instill pride in the history and culture of the Métis people".⁶ A key part of the MMF's mandate was therefore to support the commemoration of Métis leaders like Louis Riel. To understand the importance of such commemorations we can turn to Mary McCarthy, whose work on migrant group memorialization also translates well over to Indigenous groups who have been marginalized by greater Canadian society. She identifies three major reasons for minority groups to put up commemorative monuments: 1) to establish a common group identity, 2) to have a minority group memory become part of the larger whole, and 3) to oppose the hegemonic power of the majority.⁷ In the case of the Manitoba Métis, a statue of Louis Riel would help rally the Métis around a common cause, would bring attention to

³ Donald Swainson, "Rieliana and the Structure of Canadian History," *Journal of popular culture* XIV, no. 2 (1980): 290.

⁴ Hamon, "Re-Presenting Riel," s5.

⁵ The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism only focused on the two 'founding races' of Canada: the English and the French. Other ethnic groups were eventually also included in the Commission's recommendations with the notable exception of Indigenous peoples. For a description of the Commission's circumvented Indigenous voices see Eve Haque, "Public Hearing and Research," in *Multiculturalism Within a Bilingual Framework : Language, Race, and Belonging in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 117-128.

⁶ Manitoba Métis Federation, "Government Objectives," Government, accessed Apr. 8. 2022.

⁷ Mary McCarthy, "Political and Social Contestation in the Memorialization of 'Comfort Women,'" in *Public Memory in the Context of Transnational Migration and Displacement*, ed. Sabine Marschall (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 128.

Riel's achievements and role in the creation of the province, and would make Manitobans challenge their perception of Riel as a traitor.

The late 1960s were an advantageous time to push for increased Indigenous representation not only because of the changing social climate but also because of the numerous commemorative anniversaries that were taking place at the time. Saskatchewan and Alberta were both celebrating their Diamond Jubilees in 1965, Canada's centennial took place in 1967, and Manitoba's centennial followed shortly thereafter in 1970. All of these events drew attention to Canada's history, and most importantly brought funding for public art into the prairies. In Manitoba alone, 181 Centennial Projects were approved in 1967.⁸ It seemed the time was right for daring new commemorations of Canadian heroes.⁹

The first city to erect a statue of Riel was Regina, the site of Riel's 1885 trial and execution. Made by John Nugent, the sculpture depicted Riel wearing nothing but an open cloak with his head thrown back, reaching towards the sky. In her analysis of the statue, Frances Kaye suggests that Saskatchewan premier Colin Thatcher approved the memorial in a largely ineffectual political move to gain Indigenous support.¹⁰ When Nugent's statue was unveiled on the provincial legislative grounds on October 2, 1968, Riel was greatly overshadowed by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's visit and a student protest that took place at the unveiling. Although the students remained respectful throughout the official ceremony, they later took advantage of the Prime Minister's visit to call for an increase in educational funding.¹¹ The Métis were not pleased with the students co-opting the celebration, nor with Nugent's representation. Riel's supplicative posture was seen as humiliating, and his nudity was a point of particular offence. Only a year after its unveiling, Nugent's statue was already vandalized.¹² The local Métis Society protested Nugent's depiction and hoped that a new sculpture by an Indigenous artist might replace it. This however never came to pass. After twenty-three years, the controversial piece was removed from the legislative grounds and

⁸ Peter Aykroyd, "APPENDIX C: Centennial Grants Projects by Province," *The Anniversary Compulsion: Canada's Centennial Celebration, a Model Mega-Anniversary* (Toronto, Ontario: Dundurn, 1992), 180.

⁹ Potentially the most ambitious centennial celebration was Expo 67 in Montreal. The Canadian Pavilion included artwork made by First Nations and diverse works commemorating Canadian history. See "The Canadian Pavilion, Expo 67," directed by Marc Beaudet (1967: National Film Board of Canada). The centennial also funded participatory film and video projects like Challenge for Change which drew attention to often overlooked Canadian communities. See Michelle Stewart, "The Indian Film Crews Of Challenge For Change: Representation and the State," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 16, no. 2, 49–81.

¹⁰ Frances Kaye, "Any Important Form: Louis Riel in Sculpture," *Prairie Forum* 22, no. 1, Spring (1997): 111.

¹¹ Dan Bjarnason and Don Niedermayer, "1,000 students protest; hoot, jeer, shove PM," *Regina Leader-Post*, Oct. 3, 1969: 1.

¹² "Louis Riel Painted Orange," *Regina Leader-Post*, Oct. 23, 1969: 3.

moved to the Mackenzie Art Gallery Vaults where it remains today.¹³ The statue was replaced by a commemorative plaque memorializing Riel's trial.

Despite the controversial reception of Nugent's statue in Saskatchewan, Manitoba employed a very similar commemorative approach to their neighbouring province. Potentially due to the fact that the two statues were commissioned and unveiled in quick succession, Manitoban organizers learned very little from the predicament in Regina and again authorized a modernist depiction of the Métis hero. Largely through the efforts of Jean Allard, the NDP MLA for Rupertsland, a commission for a Louis Riel statue was approved by the Manitoba Centennial Project in 1970.¹⁴ A sculpture competition was held to select an artist for the job and two Franco-Manitobans, sculptor Marcien Lemay and architect Étienne Gaboury, were chosen by a jury of twenty non-Métis Manitobans.¹⁵



Étienne Gaboury, *Riel*, 1970.

The quotation “I know through the grace of God, I am the founder of Manitoba” is located on the bottom right. All photographs were taken at the statue's current location at 200 de la Cathédrale Avenue by the author.

¹³ “Riel Statue Moved,” *Regina Leader-Post*, Sept. 17, 1991: 3.

¹⁴ In 1969, Jean Allard founded the Société de Louis Riel, a group whose primary goal was to have a statue of Louis Riel be placed on the grounds of the Manitoba legislature. The project eventually received support from NDP Premier Ed Schreyer.

¹⁵ Monique Dumontet, “Controversy in the Commemoration of Louis Riel,” in *Mnemographia Canadensis Volume 2 Remember and See: Essays on Memory, Community, and Environment in Canada with Particular Reference to London, Ontario*, ed. D.M.R. Bentley (London: Canadian Poetry Press, 1999), 94.

More than a month before the statue's unveiling, newspapers were predicting that the monument would be the cause of intense popular debate. The statue had to be turned to face the legislative building only days before its debut, and some were concerned that the quotation engraved on the semi-circular walls surrounding the sculpture (most notably the line: "I know through the grace of God, I am the founder of Manitoba") would be inflammatory.¹⁶ While the media correctly anticipated the upcoming public melee, it could not foresee the impact of the statue itself.

The Riel memorial was unveiled on December 31, 1971 by Premier Schreyer to a small gathering of about 50 people. The brief bilingual ceremony on the legislative grounds acknowledged Riel's role in founding Manitoba's government and described him as an "outstanding leader" and a "pioneer in both a political and social sense".¹⁷ The public discussion however quickly turned to the statue's physical form.



Maurice Lemay, *Riel*, 1970.

¹⁶ For examples see "Une statue de Louis Riel au palais législatif," *La Liberté*, Nov. 24, 1971: 1; "River View Hindsight Turns Riel," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Dec. 22, 1971: 3; "Schreyer To Unveil Louis Riel," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Dec. 30, 1971: 37.

¹⁷ Alice Krueger, "Riel Statue Unveiled; An 'Outstanding Leader'," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Dec. 31, 1971: 3.

Lemay chose to depict Riel in an expressionist fashion. The three-metre tall bronze statue stood on a round plinth surrounded by ten-metre high half-cylindrical concrete shells. These walls largely obscured the monument from view unless the spectator approached it from the front or back. Riel was presented as nude, twisted and misshapen with his hands held behind his back. In an interview with the *Winnipeg Free Press*, Gaboury stated: “[I want] to bring out the anxiety and to express the conflict of Riel. I want people to feel Riel’s anxiety.” This objective was unquestionably achieved.



Maurice Lemay, *Riel*, 1970.

The statue was immediately a source of great controversy. Individuals interviewed by the *Winnipeg Free Press* described the representation as a “grotesque monstrosity,” a “misshapen blob of granite,” and generally “a horrible looking statue”.¹⁸ The president of the MMF called it “an insult to Louis Riel and to the Métis people” and a conservative MLA noted that “Riel’s detractors must be smirking in smug satisfaction over this unexpected and unnecessary windfall to their prejudices.”¹⁹ The statue was not, however, without its supporters. Some felt that the simple act of commemorating an Indigenous leader was a victory. Others found Lemay’s artistic rendering powerful. A letter to the editor published two weeks after Riel’s unveiling read in part: “If one truly believes in the value of Riel’s contributions, then this presentation of a humanoid figure only substantiates one’s empathy

¹⁸ Alice Krueger, “MLA’s View Of Statue: New Anguish In New ‘Blob’,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, Jan. 5, 1972: 1, 5; “Riel Statue: ‘Incongruous Monstrosity’,” *Winnipeg Free Press*, Jan. 10, 1972: 42.

¹⁹ Krueger, “MLA’s View Of Statue”; “Riel Statue: ‘Incongruous Monstrosity’.”

for the suffering mind which created our province.”²⁰ So why were there such drastically different interpretations of Lemay’s work?

Those who liked the statue largely recognized the emotional image that Lemay and Gaboury were trying to convey. They saw Riel as a man who had suffered for his cause and had long been victimized for standing up for Indigenous and French rights. A statue that accentuated this strife, therefore, did justice to Riel’s complex life and legacy. Lemay did not intend for his representation of Riel to come across as critical. In a telephone interview with Monique Dumontet in 1997, Lemay confirmed that he wanted to portray Riel as a martyr and that he had been influenced by Auguste Rodin, the father of modern sculpture whose work was also highly controversial during his lifetime.²¹ Highlighting the Métis hero’s struggle was meant to increase the public’s admiration of Riel’s accomplishments, not diminish it. Furthermore, the statue’s countenance fit into the wider Euro-North American artistic tradition of modern sculpture produced in the 1960s and 1970s. Riel was by no means the first piece of modernist sculpture displayed in Canada, nor in Winnipeg for that matter.²² Following these arguments, Lemay’s Riel was a successful piece of public art precisely because it inspired strong emotions in its viewers.

This reasoning did little to convince detractors of the statue’s merit. Many felt that Canadian society was not ready to understand the nuances of a twisted and troubled Riel and feared that Lemay’s work would further legitimize negative interpretations of the Métis leader. This fear was not unfounded. Historically, both popular and academic writings on Riel were unabashedly racist. Beginning in the early 20th century, a paradigm of ‘civilized versus savage’ was commonly used to explain the Métis rebellions. The foremost academic authority on Louis Riel at the time, George Stanley, based a large part of his analysis on this paradigm, focusing on race and later on nationhood and claiming that the rebellions could not be considered true uprisings because the Métis were “simple-minded” and incapable of political consciousness.²³ Unfortunately, there were few to no context markers provided by, or around, Lemay’s statue to help combat this derogatory view.

The public’s response to the suggestion of a Louis Riel memorial shows that this negative conception was still prevalent at the time of the sculpture’s unveiling. The *Winnipeg*

²⁰ Name Withheld, “Letter to the Editor”, *Winnipeg Free Press*, Jan. 15, 1972: 62.

²¹ Dumontet, “Controversy in the Commemoration of Louis Riel,” 96-97.

²² In the 1960s, for example, the new Winnipeg airport, along with the airports in Edmonton and Toronto, was outfitted entirely with modern art funded by a public budget. See Bernard Flaman, “Public Art and Canadian Cultural Policy: The Airports,” in *Public Art in Canada: Critical Perspectives* eds. Annie Gérin and James McLean (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 75-94.

²³ Hamon, “Re-Presenting Riel,” s11-s12.

Free Press published articles in which individuals condemned Riel's political actions, criticized his personal attributes and disparaged his commemoration.²⁴ In 1970, one reader described learning about the commemoration with "anger, revulsion and sheer disbelief," while another contended that "the tragedy of Louis Riel was the fact that he brought grief and unhappiness to everyone he encountered both in his private and public life."²⁵ Even the articles seemingly in favour of the commemoration were more likely to introduce the subject by reminding readers that he was hanged as a traitor for high treason than to outline his achievements. Critics therefore had justifiable reason to believe that the monument would be used by Riel's detractors to reinforce a negative image of the Métis leader.

Two additional features were felt to be particularly insulting: Riel's nudity and his apparent madness. Being majority catholic and socially conservative, many Métis found Riel's lack of clothing to be humiliating and disrespectful, not to mention un-statesman-like. Comparisons with the racist caricature of the 'naked savage' only exacerbated the issue.²⁶ The twisted and unnatural state of the monument also reminded viewers of Riel's alleged insanity. This point was contentious not only because it diminished Riel's heroic image, but also because it was Riel's lawyers, not Riel himself, who pleaded insanity as a defence against accusations of treason. During his trial, the Métis leader gave speeches defending his actions and rejected all accusations of madness. As other scholars have argued, the truthfulness of these allegations was essentially irrelevant; an anguished martyr was not a useful cultural symbol for the Métis who were still actively combatting the long-standing effects of institutional racism.²⁷

A further issue was the question of artistic taste. While it may be tempting to evaluate a commemorative piece primarily on how it deals with past and present memory, aesthetics remain an integral part of all art interpretation. As such, art historian Annie Gérin cautions historians not to overlook the importance of the visual when it comes to public art.²⁸ When a member of the public views an artistic work, they are more likely to react positively or negatively depending on their appreciation of the artwork's aesthetic, not its potential "performativity" or "effect on civil society". Correspondingly, many Manitobans didn't like

²⁴ See David Twiston Davies, "Last Survivor Speaks Out," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Apr. 18, 1970: 6; P. H. Gordon, "Archibald McDonald, Chief Factor, HBC: He Knew Louis Riel," *Winnipeg Free Press*, May 2, 1970: 37.

²⁵ C. M. Lavack, "Letter to the editor," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Feb. 28, 1970: 29; Nan Shipley, "Riel: Some Fact, Much Fiction," *Winnipeg Free Press*, July 13, 1970: 83.

²⁶ Dumontet, "Controversy in the Commemoration of Louis Riel," 98-99.

²⁷ Kaye, "Any Important Form," 128; Shannon Bower, "'Practical Results': The Riel Statue Controversy at the Manitoba Legislative Building," *Manitoba History*, no. 42 (2001): 37.

²⁸ Annie Gérin, Introduction to *Public Art in Canada: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Annie Gérin and James McLean (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 6-7.

Lemay's Riel simply because they found it visually unappealing. A common point of complaint was that the government had spent \$35,000 on art that the public had no desire to look at.²⁹ This debate afflicted many modernist works of public art in the country, and the counterargument was usually the same: Canadians just don't know good art.³⁰ Kaye also uses this claim to explain the Métis' negative reaction to Lemay's work. She contends that the Métis didn't understand the sculpture because they were not educated in "highbrow" modern art.³¹ As crucial as aesthetics are for art critics, this assertion diminishes how important audience reaction is to the success of public art. Shannon Bower instead argues that the Métis were highly cognizant of the power that artistic depiction could have on collective memory and therefore actively tried to prevent the image of a tortured and ambiguous Riel from becoming the emblematic interpretation of his legacy.³² The Métis were well aware that the sculpture's placement called for comparisons with the other monuments on the legislative grounds. Even the least educated of viewers would note the drastic difference in aesthetics between the straightforward and traditional depictions of Queen Victoria or the Golden Boy, and the abstract depiction of Riel. Highbrow or not, Riel's physical form was widely interpreted as demeaning.

Moreover, the sculpture's location was criticized for being obscure. The monument was erected behind the legislative building, on the South Grounds near the Assiniboine River Walkway. This location was seen in a strongly positive light by the project's architect who felt that the river site was symbolic of Métis heritage since it was at an intersection between the (White-European) legislative building and the (Indigenous) river.³³ This symbolism was not as obvious to the average viewer. Most Manitobans simply knew that Riel stood behind the legislature, while other monuments, such as the full-body representation of Queen Victoria sitting on a throne, were placed somewhere more visible on the North Grounds.

Although not explicitly said, the fact that the south grounds of the legislature were a common meeting place for the city's gay community may also have influenced the prestige associated with the location. Quips that suggested that the monument be renamed 'The Spirit of Gay Liberation' because of this connotation were not well received by politicians at the time.³⁴ It was even speculated that an instance of vandalism where someone had smashed

²⁹ Ron Tuckwell, "The passing Show: Even with Toronto," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Jan. 19, 1972: 5.

³⁰ Flaman, "Public Art and Canadian Cultural Policy," 88.

³¹ Kaye, "Any Important Form," 107-108.

³² Bower, "Practical Results," 37.

³³ Anna Tillenius, "Features: Art and Artists," *Winnipeg Free Press*, June 12, 1971: 79; Bower, "Practical Results," 36-37.

³⁴ "It is reported that all the blood drained from Premier Howard Pawley's face when the matter was mentioned to him a year ago." Christopher Dafoe, "An Abundance of Louis Riels," *Winnipeg Free Press*, April 26, 1986: 6.

Riel's genitals may have been motivated by homophobia, but since the statue was generally unpopular, other motivations were also likely.³⁵ This did however contribute to the public perception that the area was dangerous and potentially controversial in its own right. Under these circumstances, the MMF attempted to have the statue moved to a "more prominent location" better suited to the founder of the Province of Manitoba.³⁶ This effort was ultimately unsuccessful, but it further highlights that the Métis felt that the statue's placement was an insult above and beyond what they saw as its visual shortcomings.

Championed by the MMF, the Métis launched a campaign to have the statue removed in the 1980s. The province finally agreed to this request in 1991 after years of protests, sit-ins and widespread discontent with Riel's representation, not to mention numerous costly instances of vandalism. The decision however led to several counter-protests where supporters, including some members of parliament, camped around the statue to prevent its removal. Initially, Lemay was asked to create a second, more statesmanlike, sculpture of Riel, but this agreement was voided by the MMF after Lemay took part in protests opposing his first statue's removal.³⁷ This new controversy surrounding the Riel statue gained as much, if not more, media attention than the monument's initial unveiling.³⁸ The monument was ultimately removed from the legislative grounds in the early morning of July 27, 1994, in what was a "tragic" moment for its proponents and a "day of joy" for its detractors.³⁹ Instead of a second Lemay sculpture, artist Miguel Joyal was commissioned to create a more traditional and stately depiction of Riel that was unveiled on May 12, 1996.

On the whole, in the twenty-four years after its original unveiling, Lemay's Riel statue was ill-suited to the time and place it occupied. If we return to Mary McCarthy's goals of minority group memorialization, we can see that the sculpture did not allow the Métis to accomplish any of the three objectives. Lemay's Riel divided the Manitoba Métis, it drew attention to features of Riel's past that the Métis viewed as humiliating, and potentially reinforced the perception of Riel as a traitor. For all that it could be argued that the sculpture had artistic merit, the surrounding historical and physical context made it too easy for the

³⁵ Donald Campbell, "New Statue May Replace Defaced Riel: Metis Group, Province Negotiating," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Oct. 24, 1991: 22; Kevin Bruyneel, "Exiled, Executed, Exalted: Louis Riel, Homo Sacer and the Production of Canadian Sovereignty," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 3 (2010): 723.

³⁶ A letter from the MMF to the Premier of Manitoba in 1993, cited in Bower, "Practical Results," 36.

³⁷ Brian Osborne, "Corporeal Politics and the Body Politic: The Re-Presentation of Louis Riel in Canadian Identity," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 8, no. 4 (2002): 317-318.

³⁸ For the search 'Riel (or Kiel since the search function often confuses R and K) AND statue' the *Winnipeg Free Press* Newspaper Archive database brings up 59 hits from 1970-1972 and 65 hits from 1993-1995.

³⁹ Paul Samyn, "Controversial Riel Statue Taken Away: Sculptor's Emotion Captured By Documentary Film-Maker," *Winnipeg Free Press*, July 28, 1994: 17.

public to interpret the commemoration as defamatory. Since this understanding of the statue was directly contradictory to its original purpose, it can be said that while it was stationed at the Manitoba legislature, Lemay's Riel failed as a commemorative project. This however changed when the sculpture was moved to a new location.

On November 30, 1995, Lemay's Riel was installed in front of the Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface (CUSB) in the neighbourhood of Saint-Boniface, the home of Western Canada's largest francophone community. The sculpture and the \$71,5000 it cost to transport and reinstall the monument were donated to the school by the provincial government for its 175th anniversary. In addition to a change in location, the move also saw slight alterations being made to the work itself: the semicircular walls surrounding Riel were made shorter, from 30 feet to 20 feet, and the opening between the two walls was widened, from 4 feet to 8 feet.⁴⁰ The statue was given to the Collège at the request of the school's student association who was the first to make an official appeal for the sculpture after its removal from the legislative grounds was announced.⁴¹ While the monument was not beloved by all Saint-Boniface residents (indeed a petition protesting the relocation received 400 signatures)⁴² it was met with widespread acceptance in the francophone community. This change in perception was facilitated by a number of fundamental differences in the sculpture's second location.

One key difference was the shift from a majority anglophone environment downtown to the francophone environment of Saint-Boniface. Unsurprisingly, French-Canadians had historically been more sympathetic to Riel's cause. During Riel's lifetime, the Red River and North-West Rebellions caused tension between Quebec and Anglo-Canada when Francophones sided with the Métis.⁴³ In their response to the rebellions, Quebecers largely focussed on Riel's French and Catholic roots at the detriment of his Indigenous heritage. This way of thinking carried over to Manitoba where Franco-Manitobans had long celebrated Riel as a champion of provincial French-language rights without fully recognizing the complexities of his Métis ancestry. By the end of the 20th century, the community had begun to highlight and celebrate the particularities of the Métis Nation,⁴⁴ but Riel remained a central part of the Franco-Manitoban collective memory. All this to say that the majority of the

⁴⁰ Karine Beaudette, "La statue controversée est de nouveau debout," *La Liberté*, Nov. 24, 1995: 3.

⁴¹ Jean-Pierre Dubé, "Les francophones de Saint-Boniface veulent la statue de Lemay," *La Liberté*, Nov. 22, 1991: 7.

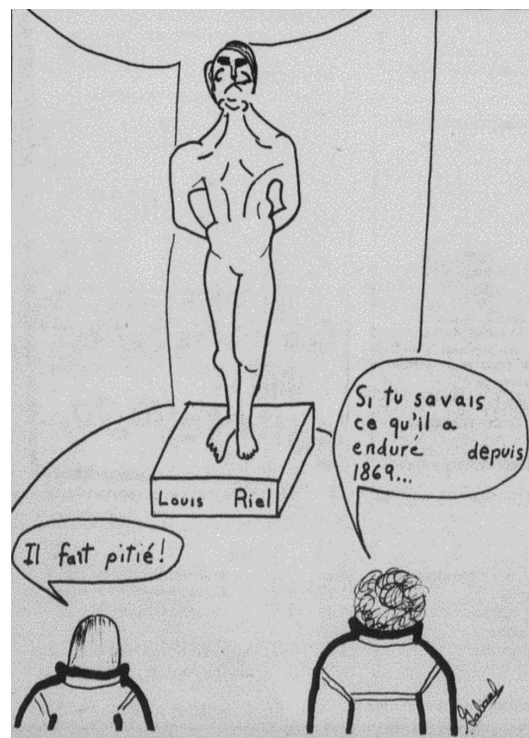
⁴² Augustine Abraham, "Letter to the editor," *La Liberté*, Dec. 16, 1994: 5.

⁴³ Bruyneel, "Exiled, Executed, Exalted," 719.

⁴⁴ For example, one of the explanations CUSB's president Paul Ruest gave for moving the statue to the grounds of the Collège was to draw more attention to Métis history. Paul Ruest, "Letter to the editor," *La Liberté*, Oct. 21, 1994: 4.

residents of Saint-Boniface and the students and faculty at the Collège came from a historic tradition that viewed Riel as a thoroughly heroic figure, not the traitor often presented to anglophone audiences.

Because of their historic ties to Riel, Franco-Manitobans did not react to Lemay's sculpture in the same way as other Winnipeggers. Plans to commemorate Riel gained public support from the community early in the 1960s,⁴⁵ and *La Liberté* featured the monument prominently after its inauguration. In the first issue released after its debut, the newspaper published an editorial congratulating the province for honouring a Métis hero.⁴⁶ In the following months, with the exception of a letter to the editor which suggested that Riel looked like a monkey,⁴⁷ very little of what is said about the sculpture was negative.⁴⁸ Even the articles that found the statue visually unappealing were generally supportive. One Métis reader valued the sculpture despite its "grotesque" expression because it reminded Manitobans of the Métis' history of struggle and subjugation.⁴⁹



Gabriel, "Louis Riel," *La Liberté*, January 5, 1972: 4.

⁴⁵ "Les projets du centenaire proposés par les "historiens" de St-Boniface," *La Liberté et le patriote*, Oct. 23, 1964: 1.

⁴⁶ Arthur Dupuis, "Editorial," *La Liberté*, Jan. 5, 1972: 4.

⁴⁷ Jacqueline Emond, "Letter to the editor," *La Liberté*, Mar. 1, 1972: 11.

⁴⁸ It is however worthwhile to note that in the month that followed Riel's unveiling, surprisingly few opinion pieces were published about the statue. Instead, *La Liberté* was practically inundated by responses to a letter written by a father calling for a modernization of the Catholic sermon. See Un père de famille, "Letter to the editor," *La Liberté*, January 5, 1972: 4.

⁴⁹ "[La statue représente] les contributions [des Métis] qui n'ont pas été acceptées par les Manitobains et c'est pourquoi le besoin d'une statue, si grotesque soit-elle, nous en donne le souvenir." Antoine Lussier, "Letter to the editor," *La Liberté*, March 15, 1972: 4.

The editorial cartoon above was published after the sculpture's unveiling followed a similar vein. The cartoon shows one person, possibly a child, looking at Riel saying: "He looks pitiful!". Another replies: "If you only knew what he's had to endure since 1869..." This image exposes some of the multifaceted reactions that Franco-Manitobans had towards Lemay's Riel. It acknowledges that the sculpture was at first glance anguished, even pitiful, while highlighting the deep sense of affinity and empathy that the French-Canadian community felt for Riel's struggle. It also recognized that this message may go over the heads of those who were less well informed on Métis history. Overall, Franco-Manitobans in the 1970s were more accepting of Lemay's Riel than their anglophone neighbours.

By the time the statue was relocated to Saint-Boniface, there had also been significant changes in the wider public perception of Riel. As fascination with the Métis leader increased, a bona fide 'Riel industry' emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition to scholarly attention, Louis Riel was now also the star of popular histories. This development coincided with the popularization of the new social history movement and as a result, the 'great man theory' which had previously been used to explain Riel's impact was replaced by a larger focus on Métis society.⁵⁰ In 1992, Riel was officially recognized as one of the Fathers of Confederation by both the federal and Manitoba provincial governments.⁵¹ By 1995, Manitobans were significantly better informed on Riel than they had been in the 1970s.

The sculpture's new surroundings at CUSB also helped render the commemoration more successful. To begin, Riel was moved off a backyard river walkway on public property to the front entrance of a post-secondary institution. In a letter explaining the school's decision to accept the statue, CUSB's president Paul Ruest argued that a university setting was the perfect place for a controversial memorial since such an institution invites reflection, comprehension and tolerance of competing opinions.⁵² Additionally, the sculpture was moved from its isolated spot between commemorations of colonial figures to an emerging 'Riel district' in central St Boniface. By the mid-1990s, the area around CUSB boasted an astounding number of commemorations of the Métis leader. By the time a viewer reached the sculpture at CUSB, they would have passed a bust of Riel by artist Réal Bérard, had the opportunity to learn about Riel and Métis heritage at the St Boniface Museum, and walked by

⁵⁰ Hamon, "Re-Presenting Riel," s25-s26.

⁵¹ "The House of Commons recognizes Louis Riel as a founder of Manitoba," Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, accessed Apr. 10, 2022.

⁵² "Un milieu universitaire doit se prêter à ce genre de réflexion qui invite à la compréhension, à la tolérance et éventuellement au respect des opinions divergentes. La présence de cette statue sera sans contredit une invitation dans ce sens." Paul Ruest, "Letter to the editor," *La Liberté*, Oct. 21, 1994: 4.

Riel's gravesite,⁵³ all of which presented Riel in a more traditional fashion. Many of the people frequenting the area would even have been alumni of Collège Louis Riel or CUSB, Riel's alma mater. Kevin Bruyneel suggests that Joyal's new statue on the legislative grounds also influenced how Lemay's sculpture was understood at CUSB. Having one work present Riel as a statesman and the other present him as tortured allowed spectators to understand the man as a "more complex whole".⁵⁴ In short, as more commemorations were erected in Riel's honour, the public became more willing to accept Lemay's nuanced representation since it was then counterbalanced by more straightforward depictions.



Plaque in front of Maurice Lemay, *Riel*, 1970.

Organizers made an effort to provide more context for Lemay's sculpture once it was at the Collège. As such, a new plaque acknowledging the statue's controversy and explaining why the work was removed from the legislative grounds was erected in front of the statue. In her article on confronting controversial memorials, Melanie Buffington suggests that a monument's context needs to be explained at three levels to be understood: "the history of the

⁵³ The gravesite is the oldest memorial erected in Riel's honour. After being hanged in Saskatchewan, Riel's body was brought to Saint-Boniface where he was buried on the 12th of December 1885. In 1893 the Union Nationale Métisse de St-Joseph du Manitoba erected a headstone for Riel's grave. A commemoration to celebrate Riel has been held there every year since.

⁵⁴ Bruyneel, "Exiled, Executed, Exalted," 7725.

person or event being depicted, the time in which the object was created, and the present time in which the work is being viewed and understood”.⁵⁵ Claire Baxter adds the monument’s physical location and relationship to its surroundings as a fourth dimension.⁵⁶ All of these contextual markers were provided on the CUSB campus, either by the description on the plaque or by the surrounding Riel district. CUSB provided additional context inside the school in the form of a photo series depicting Lemay’s artistic process while creating Riel. These context markers have helped inform future generations of CUSB students about the statue and the controversy surrounding it.



The hallway and photographs depicting Lemay’s artistic process. The ‘exhibit’ also includes a brief biography of Lemay and the Riel sculpture.

⁵⁵ Melanie Buffington, “Confronting Hate: Ideas for Art Educators to Address Confederate Monuments,” *Art education (Reston)* 72, no. 1 (2019): 16.

⁵⁶ Claire Baxter, “Erasing History?: Monuments as Archaeological Artefacts.” *Public history review* 28 (2021): 106.

All things considered, Lemay's Riel was markedly more successful at CUSB than it was at the legislature. Discussion about the statue in Winnipeg newspapers decreased substantially after the sculpture was relocated. And while more recent articles may have made note of the controversy triggered by Lemay's work,⁵⁷ there were no more motions to have the monument decommissioned. The statue also remained popular with the students, faculty and staff at CUSB. In 2008, when the Maison des artistes visuels francophones wanted to acquire the statue for a sculpture garden, CUSB's student population fought to have the monument stay where it was. Conversations about the potential relocation of the sculpture revealed that students felt a "profound attachment" to Lemay's Riel.⁵⁸ Relocating the statue had therefore successfully changed the way that the public perceived the monument. Evidently, the 1990s were the right time to move Riel to a new, more suitable environment and thereby allow the public to reinterpret Lemay's sculpture in a fresh context. In the end, this controversy worked out for the best for all concerned parties: the MMF was pleased with the new statesman-like Riel at the legislature and Saint-Boniface residents celebrated the acquisition of a historically significant representation of a historically significant man. This outcome is quite remarkable in the greater context of worldwide 'statue wars' which generally end as controversially as they began. As Canadian society continues to take steps to decolonize our public spaces, we will necessarily be faced with an increasing number of commemorative controversies. While there is no 'one size fits all solution' to these disputes, Lemay's Riel does provide a useful place to start.

⁵⁷ See for example Morley Walker, "Significant New Art Exhibit: Louis Riel Art 'Symbol of Empowerment'," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Jan. 13, 2001: 30; Mary Agnes Welch, "L is for Louis Riel: Lots of Likenesses," *Winnipeg Free Press*, Aug. 18, 2008: 13.

⁵⁸ Sophie Desruisseaux, "Le CUSB dit non," *La Liberté*, Jan. 30, 2008: 9.

Bibliography

- Aykroyd, Peter. *The Anniversary Compulsion : Canada's Centennial Celebration, a Model Mega-Anniversary*. Toronto, Ontario: Dundurn, 1992.
- Baxter, Claire. "Erasing History?: Monuments as Archaeological Artefacts." *Public history review* 28 (2021): 106-110.
- Bower, Shannon. "'Practical Results': The Riel Statue Controversy at the Manitoba Legislative Building." *Manitoba History*, no. 42 (2001): 30-38.
- Bruyneel, Kevin. "Exiled, Executed, Exalted: Louis Riel, Homo Sacer and the Production of Canadian Sovereignty." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 3 (2010): 711-732.
- Buffington, Melanie L. "Confronting Hate: Ideas for Art Educators to Address Confederate Monuments." *Art education (Reston)* 72, no. 1 (2019): 14-20.
- "The Canadian Pavilion, Expo 67," directed by Marc Beudet. 1967: National Film Board of Canada. https://www-nfb-ca.uml.idm.oclc.org/film/the_canadian_pavilion_expo_67/
- Dumontet, Monique. "Controversy in the Commemoration of Louis Riel". In *Mnemographia Canadensis Volume 2 Remember and See: Essays on Memory, Community, and Environment in Canada with Particular Reference to London, Ontario*, edited by D.M.R. Bentley. London: Canadian Poetry Press, 1999.
- Flaman, Bernard. "Public Art and Canadian Cultural Policy: The Airports." In *Public Art in Canada : Critical Perspectives*, edited by Annie Gérin and James McLean, 75-94. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.
- Gérin, Annie. Introduction to *Public Art in Canada: Critical Perspectives*, 3-22. Edited by Annie Gérin and James McLean. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.
- Hamon, M. Max. "Re-Presenting Riel: 100 Years in the Canadian Historical Review." *The Canadian historical review* 102, no. s1 (2021): s1-s31.
- Haque, Eve. *Multiculturalism Within a Bilingual Framework : Language, Race, and Belonging in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018.
- Kaye, Frances. "Any Important Form: Louis Riel in Sculpture." *Prairie Forum* 22, no. 1, Spring (1997): 103-133.
- Lindsey, Kiera and Mariko Smith. "'Setting the Scene': Statue Wars and Ungrateful Citizens." *Public History Review* 28 (2021): 1-17.
- McCarthy, Mary. "Political and Social Contestation in the Memorialization of 'Comfort Women.'" In *Public Memory in the Context of Transnational Migration and Displacement*, edited by Sabine Marschall, 127-156. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020.

Manitoba Métis Federation. "Government Objectives," Government. Accessed Apr. 8, 2022.
<https://www.mmf.mb.ca/government-objectives>

Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages. "The House of Commons recognizes Louis Riel as a founder of Manitoba," Historical Events. Accessed Apr. 10, 2022.
<https://www.clo-ocol.gc.ca/en/timeline-event/house-commons-recognizes-louis-riel-founder-manitoba>

Osborne, Brian. "Corporeal Politics and the Body Politic: The Re-Presentation of Louis Riel in Canadian Identity." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 8, no. 4 (2002): 303–322.

Stewart, Michelle. "The Indian Film Crews Of Challenge For Change: Representation and the State." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 16, no. 2, 49–81.

Swainson, Donald. "Rieliana and the Structure of Canadian History." *Journal of popular culture* XIV, no. 2 (1980): 286–297.