

La Chanson de Riel: A Story of Métis History and Relations

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This is a story about Métis relations, oral history, and Louis Riel. I would not have this story to share if not for Ron Burwash, his grandma, his family, and their Métis relations, so it is also a story about them. Kichi kinanaskomitin (big thanks) to Elder Ron Burwash for gifting me with the French and English translations of La Chanson de Riel and his time in conversation about its history and significance. I will tell the story of Riel's song as Elder Ron has told it to me. In sharing how this song came to me, I will also discuss the significance and validity of oral history and the importance of intergenerational transmission of history and culture in the Métis context. Elder Ron has sung this song across the Métis homeland, carrying on its history and honouring Riel, as the generations of his family did before him. It is an honour to help Elder Ron get this song out to the Métis and other people so that its message, its author, and the Métis relations that carried it to today can be recognized and remembered. What I am about to share with you is oral history that was gifted to me by Elder Ron, a history that goes all the way back to Riel. Direct quotes come from a letter from Ron to Laura Forsythe (my auntie) from Flin Flon Manitoba, dated October 27, 2023.

Elder Ron and his family grew up in the Boggy Creek / San Clara area of Manitoba, and he now resides in Flin Flon with his wife, who is also Métis. La Chanson de Riel was gifted to Ron at fourteen years old when he heard his grandmother and his aunt singing it in French. Ron had learned French from his dad and uncles, and because of his knowledge of the language and his guitar skills, his aunt had his grandmother gift him the song. It was a song that many Métis families in the Boggy Creek/San Clara area knew of and sang. Ron recalls, "My uncles and aunts used to play Mom's song, as all the families around there." La Chanson de Riel was written by Louis Riel while he was incarcerated in November of 1885, about a week before he was hung in Regina. The song and its lyrics convey the feelings of Riel in such a sombre time. Elder Ron shared that there can't be a completely direct translation from the French song to an English version, so instead, he explained and translated its meaning. In the first verse, Riel speaks of "his feelings about the happenings at the time of his incarceration and the Battles around Batoche." In the second verse, Riel receives a letter from his mother, but he has no pen or ink to write back. The third verse depicts Riel's desperate attempt to write to his mother using his own blood, knowing that when she reads the letter, she will also experience heartbreak. The fourth verse imagines Riel's mother's reaction, gathering his brothers and sisters to pray for him. The final verse is perhaps the most sorrowful, as it seems Riel has accepted his fateful death, a death we know was a brave one.

Although this was a family song, its lyrics reveal its origins. Ron's grandmother's song was written by Louis Riel. Ron explains that his grandmother's dad was a first cousin to Riel, and through her father's contact with Riel's family during late 1885, the song came to Ron's grandmother's family. Ron also relayed to me the familial importance of passing this rich history on and honouring its author, sharing, "My uncle Bob Lavallee used to tell me you have to keep this going." That's been a life goal for Ron since, a life goal he has very much accomplished.

The way Ron described the song over time and how he has heard it in different parts of the Métis homeland reminds me of the Welcome Song I sing in Anishinaabemowin with my students. I've heard the Welcome Song sung with different timings and with slight language variations, yet the song's variations have passed across generations and Anishinaabe lands, all carrying the same message of welcoming the ancestors. This is also the case with La Chanson de Riel. It has been sung, and its message shared, as it was passed on intergenerationally across the Métis homeland:

I didn't sing the song quite like my Grandmother; I sort of used my style and the tune of the Poitras and Carriere families; this song was not with a certain tune...a few years back I came around some info about a fellow by the name of Joe Venne from Binscarth, Manitoba...he said that Riel was some sort of uncle to him and that he knew that Riel had written the song. His words were the same as mine from my Grandma. Except for one verse which was a little different; but that could happen easily as words could change over 100 years a little, a lot of Métis history is documented by word of mouth so as well as other means...I sang this song all over Western Canada in the Homeland. As well as in Belcourt, North Dakota and a lot of the old elders know the song or of it...if you go on YouTube...you will get a Métis documentary I did a year or so ago. In this video you will hear my version of the song; I shared this with the Gabriel Dumont Institute in Saskatoon, Sask. and I heard a young man singing the song the same as I do. He probably heard my version.

The tune and specific language of La Chanson de Riel may vary across time and space, but its message, history, and author's legacy have lived on as Métis families like Ron's have given the song life over generations. Even now, the young man singing Ron's version could be passing it on, as I hope to do with this work.

Oral history can be misrepresented as history that can't be authenticated. The story and relational history of how La Chanson de Riel came to Ron through his family, and to me through Ron, disputes this misrepresentation of oral history while demonstrating the importance of oral history in Métis culture. Louis Riel is undoubtedly a Métis hero, and it feels rather special, like a responsibility, that this song came to me through my Métis community relations. I did not know Elder Ron or La Chanson de Riel until a Métis aunty introduced me to his song and shared his contact information. After reading what Elder Ron had written to my aunty about the song, immediately my interest was sparked in a more spiritual than academic manner; it is a relational duty for me to help Elder Ron pass this song on to other Métis relations so its history and message might impact them as well. Through a conversation with Elder Ron about his family, his relations, and how the song came to him, I was able to understand how he knew this song was Riel's. The song's memory, authorship, and context had been meticulously passed down through four generations of Métis family. The same memory, authorship, and context were also passed down in other families across the homeland, and we know this by evidence of the varied versions Elder Ron has heard. The history and lyrics of this song being consistently known by elders and sung across the Métis homeland is authentication enough for the questions of its origins. In conversation, Elder Ron and I shared the feeling: Who are we to question the stories of our grandmothers, uncles, and aunts anyway? They have been and always will be true.

I never had my Métis grandma around to share her stories with me, so writing this and interviewing Elder Ron was an incredibly rewarding lesson about, and brief immersion in, Métis relations and oral history. For this lesson, story, song, experience, and the grandfather-like connection I have been gifted, I would like to again say kichi kinanaskomitin to Elder Ron, his family, and Riel. Listening to and learning from Elder Ron through his song and his story, a way I was not blessed to grow up with, profoundly impacted me in a positive way. I'm proud of my people and the Métis families who have kept their songs and stories going, and I am inspired to pass these things on to the next generation. Passing on stories and songs like La Chanson de Riel is critical to honouring those who came before us, showcases the importance of oral history to the Métis, and can be deeply impactful for the generations that come after us. I hope this story inspires you to search for and remember your stories and pass on these stories, too.

La Chanson de Riel

Written by Louie Riel before he was hung November 16, 1885

C'est aux Champs du Batailles, qu'on voit crime et douleur.
Ont voit que d'outre par, qui fait frémir mon cœur.
Ont voit que d'outre par, qui fait frémir mon cœur.

Quant je reçois cette lettre, de ma chère momma.
J'avais ni plume, ni encre pour pouvoir leurs écrire.
J'avais ni plume, ni encre pour pouvoir leurs écrire.

Ah j'ai prié mon canif, je l'ai trempée dans mon sang.
Pour écrire un lettre, ah ma chère momma.
Quand elle reçois cette lettre, cette écriture en sang.
Ces yeux baignant de l'arme, son cœur san va mourant.
Ces yeux baignant de l'arme, son cœur san va mourant.

Se jettes a genou par terre appellent toute ses enfants.
Priez pour votre frère, qui est aux régiments.
Priez pour votre frère, qui est aux régiments.

Mourier faut toute mourir, toute chacun viendra son tour.
J'ai mieux mourir en brave, faut toute mourir un jour.
J'ai mieux mourir en brave, faut toute mourir un jour.

La Chanson de Riel

It's on the Field of Battle, where you see crime and pain.
When seeing what is to happen, it makes my heart sad or die.
When seeing what is to happen, it makes my heart sad.

When I receive this letter from my Dear Mother
I have no pen, no ink to provide their letter.
I have no pen, no ink to provide their letter.

Oh, I take my jackknife, I soak it in my blood
For to write a letter to My Dear Mother.
When she receives this letter, this writing in blood,
Her eyes fill with alarm and her heart begins to die.
Her eyes fill with alarm and her heart begins to die.

She jumps to her knees on the ground, gathering all her children
Pray for your brother who is in the army.
Pray for your brother who is in the army.

Death makes all die; all each comes his turn.
I'll have a better death in Bravery because we all die one day.
I'll have a better death in Bravery because we all die one day.

Biography

Nitisnikáson níso wáhsihskwapiskáw mihkináhk iskwéw mína Carly Lawton. My two names are Shining Turtle Woman and Carly Lawton. My Métis family, my dad's side, was from the Red River Parishes of St. John and Kildonan and were later granted scrip in what is now Argyle, Manitoba. About a hundred years ago, they lived in the Métis community of Poplar Point and have been in Winnipeg since 1920, where I reside today. I spent a handful of years growing up in Victoria Beach and consider those forests and shores of southern Lake Winnipeg home as well. My family names are Sutherland, Inkster, and Dyer, and I am a Manitoba Métis Federation citizen.
