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ON THE
art OF BEING
CANADIAN

Sherrill Grace



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CHAPTER THREE

Inventing Iconic Figures

Within national discourse the stakes of biography are high;
the meaning of certain life-stories helps to shape the ways
in which the nation and its history are defined.

— Marita Sturken

Perhaps we have a difficult time defining what our country means
because we know so little about the people who made it mean something.

— Paula Todd

I INVENTING ICONS

Every country has its heroes and Canada is no exception, although I prefer to call ours *iconic figures* for reasons that will, I hope, become clear. Charlemagne, Joan of Arc, Richard the Lion-Hearted, Napoleon, Sir Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi, Lawrence of Arabia, Scott of the Antarctic, the Red Baron, Abraham Lincoln, Helen Keller — I could keep adding to the list almost indefinitely. In all these cases, the heroic figures were real individuals whose status as hero was confirmed by their contributions to some cause or event larger and of much greater social and historical significance than themselves. Often they died young and violently; often they lived flamboyantly. But most importantly, they were

written about in histories, biographies, fiction, poetry, and plays, sung about, painted, or in more recent times had films made about them. The fact of existing and accomplishing something was only a first step: in Canada this step may have entitled some of them to get their names on the 2004 list of “greatest Canadians,” but that alone does not make them icons. It is the artists and storytellers who transform them into larger-than-life figures and give their lives meaning — for a national story, for an epic event, or for their times.

In this chapter, I examine a few examples of Canadians who have been transformed into iconic figures by our artists and writers, whether or not we agree that they deserve to be called heroes or can agree on what the term *hero* means. Many unusual, heroic, or talented Canadians have not yet reached iconic status, and some probably never will. But there are a few who have been so written about, sung about, reproduced on canvas and film, and photographed that they have developed an afterlife in excess of anything they did while alive; their stories circulate through layers of popular, national, and regional consciousness. Biography is a crucial player in this process of invention, in part because life stories are more widely read and influence greater numbers of readers than scholarly studies do, and in part because they necessarily reproduce factual, historical evidence (such as photographs), and by doing so, they resituate and inflect the meanings, or so-called *truth* of such documents, to support the art of biographical narrative.¹ But images of Canadian icons also appear in unlikely places such as billboards and websites, and they prove marketable on coffee mugs and T-shirts. In my book on Tom Thomson, I called this process *invention* and argued that “Tom Thomson,” as we know him, is the product of obsessive invention by artists, biographers, and curators, as well as by popular culture more generally. I will revisit the inventions of Tom Thomson, but I first want to consider some of the other Canadians who have been invented and to ask why these individuals appeal to

their inventors, what makes them *Canadian* icons, and what their *inventions* might tell us about being Canadian.

The four figures I focus on are Louis Riel (1844-85), Emily Carr (1871-1945), Tom Thomson (1877-1917), and Mina Benson Hubbard (1870-1956). I have chosen these four because they have been so extensively invented and because they represent a wide span of the country's geography, but a number of other candidates also come to mind and deserve at least a brief mention. For example, Sir John Franklin has enjoyed a lively posthumous existence in Canada — in Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* and Richler's *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, or in Stan Rogers' ballad "The Northwest Passage."² So has Billy Bishop, who is not only the title character of *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, but has had biographies, a film, and a children's play devoted to him; moreover, he appears on prominent billboards in Owen Sound.³ And yet, war heroes, as such, are less popular choices for artistic invention in Canada than in other countries: Major James Walsh is portrayed as a defeated man more than a success; John McCrae is largely remembered for his poem "In Flanders Fields"; our generals, such as Sir Arthur Currie, have not had the easiest time of it abroad or at home. The story of Roméo Dallaire confirms this situation, although as time passes, Dallaire is acquiring a larger-than-life symbolic profile that may result in iconization.⁴ Norman Bethune has cropped up in at least two major novels (Hugh MacLennan's *The Watch That Ends the Night* and Dennis Bock's *The Communist's Daughter*), two plays, and a film, so he may develop the status in Canada that I am describing.⁵ Among women, Emily Murphy has appeared in plays and film, and Nellie McClung has had a degree of artistic afterlife, but Laura Secord notwithstanding, Susanna Moodie enjoys top iconic status as the prototypical pioneer, in very large part because of Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, for which Atwood did a set of illustrations.⁶ Pauline Johnson's profile continues to blossom in new inventions (in

addition to biographies and extensive websites, a chamber opera commissioned by City Opera Vancouver, with libretto by Margaret Atwood and music by Christos Hatzis, is expected in 2010), and Anna Mae Pictou Aquash has been reinvented in contemporary plays and films.⁷ Another interesting female candidate for iconic status is the northern explorer I mentioned in Chapter 1, Mina Benson Hubbard, whose process of invention I will examine shortly.⁸

Glenn Gould is another rich subject of invention: he was brilliant, eccentric, reclusive, and very private, and he died in his prime. He has already had one excellent feature film made about him, François Girard's *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould* (1993) starring Colm Feore — which, as I mentioned in my first chapter, transformed Gould into North — several documentary films, two major biographies, a play, and a children's book.⁹ Pierre Elliott Trudeau is another candidate for iconization through obsessive invention. As I write, John English is preparing Volume 2 of his monumental biography for publication, and Justin Trudeau is stepping into the political limelight to keep the Trudeau myth alive (as he did with the Talbot Papineau myth in *The Great War*). There are other biographical studies of Trudeau as well as Linda Griffiths' highly imaginative biographical play *Maggie and Pierre* and the 2002 CBC television docudrama *Trudeau* (also starring Feore). However, Trudeau has not been dead quite long enough for his voice to haunt us as Karen Connelly says our dead will do. And then, there is Maurice Richard. Here is a man whose symbolic stature and cultural capital for Quebec has only begun to be tapped by the 2005 film *The Rocket*, although his story as a hockey star is well known, and a statue of him skating can be seen in Jacques Cartier Park in Gatineau, Quebec.¹⁰

The art of biography is central to the process of inventing iconic figures, and biographers choose their subjects for many of the same reasons that appeal to visual and literary artists working at the more obviously

fictional end of the creative spectrum. Usually, the ideal subjects for invention are dead, and we *prefer* them, if possible, to die fairly young. Politicians and soldiers have not greatly appealed to the collective imagination, at least not so far, and I recall George Woodcock wondering why Canadians are attracted to Riel instead of Gabriel Dumont, the warrior and man of action, and musing about other common features of our icons (see Woodcock 9-11).¹¹ In life, Woodcock suggests, they were complex three-dimensional human beings and often outsiders, with a range of very human failings. They struggled against the norms of their day; they were considered mad, weird, or eccentric. And there was some element of mystery or debate about them — certainly, this last quality is a key to all four figures I examine: Louis Riel, Emily Carr, Tom Thomson, and Mina Benson Hubbard.

II FROM BATOCHE TO THE MANITOBA LEGISLATURE: LOUIS RIEL

I have chosen Riel as my first case study in iconization for two reasons: he has probably been more written about, contested, and artistically represented than any other figure from our history, and he was himself a poet, a very theatrical personality, and a man who appreciated the power of art. In fact, it was Riel who once prophesied that his “people would sleep for 100 years, and when they [awoke] it [would] be the artists who [would] give them back their spirit” (quoted in Mattes 21). The people he referred to were the Métis; however, with the irony or poetic justice of hindsight, he might almost be described today as speaking for all of Canada. Louis Riel is to this day the only political leader in Canada to have any real claim to the title *artist*. How could I not begin with him! But so many others precede me in this endeavour that I cannot possibly mention, let alone examine, all of them. The inventions began in 1885, the year of his

execution, with early plays in English and French, and by now more than thirty plays have been written about him (Johnson 291). Thus far, he is the only one of my icons to have had an opera composed on his life — I want to return to this work — and he has been invented and reinvented by poets, novelists, visual artists (including sculptors), filmmakers, popular singers, and inevitably by biographers. Historians have debated his legacy and his sanity, and Albert Braz has examined his broad cultural inventions in a full-length study called *The False Traitor* (2003). Over the 120 years since his death, Riel has been invented to serve many purposes, and his significance has shifted with the times. At the beginning, he was either a hero and a martyr or a villainous half-breed murderer and traitor, depending on whether you came from Quebec or Orange Ontario, were Catholic or Protestant, spoke French or English, championed freedoms and rights for Indians and Métis or had invested your money in the CPR. Although many layers of meaning have been added to the story, some of the early negative classification still sticks; some people in Saskatchewan were outraged when a public highway was named for Louis Riel because they saw him as a traitor (see Racette 46). By the 1960s and into the 1970s, Riel was being separated from his specifically Métis roots and context to be transformed into a mythic representative of the Canadian nation, most centrally a figure of western alienation who died resisting Ottawa and eastern Canadian hegemony. After the publication of his own diaries (in 1976), poetry (1985, 1993), and other writings (1985), it became possible to explore the inner man, not solely his sanity, but his whole psyche, personality, and his personal relationships, and much of the invention from the mid-seventies onward tries to present Riel as a human being in his time and place. Most recently, contemporary Métis artists have begun to reclaim him as their own and to insist that he be seen within a Métis context as just one figure from their history, albeit the most complex and charismatic.

The name Louis Riel, then, sends out a host of mixed messages, and it seems to me that the way one sees him is inevitably weighed down by politics to a degree not so apparent with Carr, Thomson, or Hubbard. One might think that his biographers would be the most neutral and even-handed, and yet biography is itself an art, and the biographer, who belongs to his or her own time and place, cannot help but read Riel in those terms and with the materials available at the time of creating the biography. Although the biographical inventions have presented the facts of his life, they have also contributed either to a less than sympathetic portrait of a half-breed, a madman, or a traitor (see Flanagan, Osler, and Stanley), or to a very sympathetic portrait of the man as a complex human being, with a noble vision for his country, who was betrayed by politicians, developers, and religious bigots. This last version of Riel is most definitely the one that Maggie Siggins gives us in her 1994 volume *Riel: A Life of Revolution*. Siggins draws extensively on Riel's poetry, letters, and diary entries and thereby allows him, to some degree, to have his own voice (see Figure 25). The result, of course, is that he comes alive in three dimensions as a real human being struggling with the dilemmas, challenges, and demons that constitute his humanity and make his death genuinely regrettable on the human level; this Riel is not an abstraction or a symbol. Nonetheless, he stands for something larger than his own individual self and family or even the Métis nation. For Siggins, Riel epitomizes what could still be good about Canada — our tolerance and ethnic/cultural diversity — because we are only now (in the 1990s when she was writing, and today) starting to recognize and value Native cultures. According to Siggins, "What makes Louis Riel so intriguing is that he managed to straddle two cultures, Native and white, and came as close as anyone to envisioning a sympathetic and equitable relationship between the two. That Canadians may someday achieve this vision," she concludes, "remains Riel's legacy" (448).

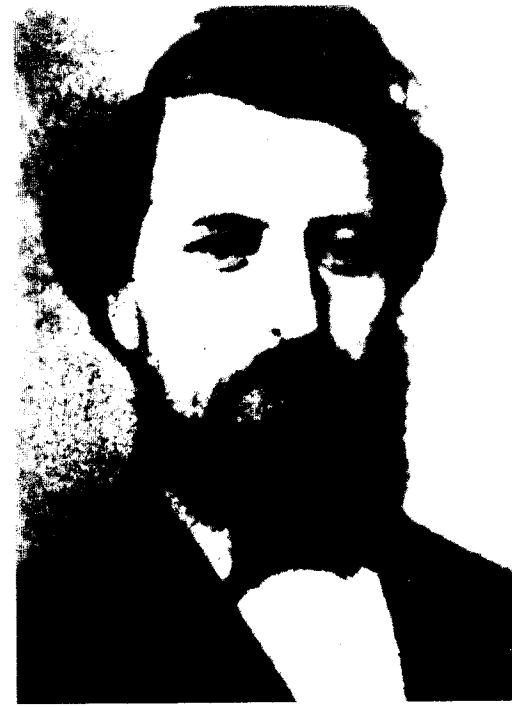


FIGURE 25 This photograph of Louis Riel, taken at the time of his August 1885 trial, is among the most familiar surviving images of the man. It has been reproduced in biographies and alluded to in artists' portrayals of Riel, thereby contributing over time to the general public recognition and iconic power of his face. This is the formally attired Louis Riel, whose sculpture (minus the full beard) now stands outside the Manitoba legislature, but the face and intense gaze reverberate in works by Marcien Lemay, John Boyle, and Jane Ash Poitras; see Figures 27, 28, and 29. Reproduced with permission, Saskatchewan Archives R-8750.

I am less certain about how to view or summarize the latest biographical invention of Riel except to say that, to my eyes at least, it is the most highly innovative treatment yet and that a younger generation appears to be hooked on the book.¹² In 2003 Chester Brown published his labour of

five years *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* as a graphic novel. He has relied most on Siggins for his facts, and the Riel in his representation emerges less as a comic-strip hero or villain than as a human being with great gifts and fatal flaws. Without question, the villains in this version of Riel's life are Macdonald, George Stephen of the CPR, and the Thomas Scott/John Schultz contingent; Gabriel Dumont emerges as the more typical warrior hero — but that may be because, in the genre of comic strips or comic books, the pow-wham-bang exclamations suit action more than they do reflection (see Figure 26). In a recent interview, Brown noted that he was drawn to the story for its violence but that he did not want to depict Riel as either a hero (as Siggins does) or a victim.¹³ He ends the story with a page illustrating Riel's hanging, but only five of the six available panels have images, and the last one is empty; my interpretation of this blank space is that Brown refuses to comment on the ultimate meaning of Riel's life or death. Unlike Siggins or the earlier biographers, he withholds his own final judgment, although he does add an epilogue and a set of notes to round off his narrative.

For me, one of the most compelling works about Riel is not biography but a novel: Rudy Wiebe's sweeping historical novel *The Scorched-Wood People*. The year 1977 seems to have been a magical point in Canadian literary culture (a bit like 1930) because it produced both this novel and so many major works that brought the Great War back to centre stage.¹⁴ By calling his novel the "scorched-wood people" — the English translation of *bois-brûlés* — Wiebe signals his intention to tell the history of the

FIGURE 26 (FACING PAGE) Chester Brown's *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* (2003) is possibly the most innovative treatment to date of Riel's life, trial, vision, and execution. For his representations of Riel, Brown has drawn upon surviving photographs. This page (188) is reproduced with the permission and courtesy of Chester Brown and the publisher Drawn & Quarterly. © Chester Brown, *Louis Riel* (2003).



Métis, not just the story of Riel, from the perspective of the Métis themselves. His chosen narrator is the long-dead chronicler and singer of Métis history Pierre Falcon, and his use of this voice and perspective is a bold imaginative step in an era that was soon to chastise any white artist for daring to appropriate the voice or story of a non-white person. But I think Wiebe succeeds. His goal is to celebrate the Métis rebellion against an imperialist eastern or central Canadian government, and he divides his story between Riel and Dumont, even though (to my mind at least) it is Riel who occupies the novel's emotional and moral centre stage. In this novel, as in *A Discovery of Strangers*, Wiebe uses the form of the novel deliberately to create a national story that resists the Lawrentian thesis of Donald Creighton, who argued that central Canada was the heartland of the new country. Wiebe's view is closer to W.L. Morton's because he champions the West as the potential cradle of Canadian identity.¹⁵ *Potential* — and I stress this word. In Wiebe's portrayal of Riel's story, the potential for a genuinely Canadian homeland, built upon the foundations of tolerance and ethnic diversity and recognizing Louis Riel as the founding father of Manitoba, is destroyed by the violence of Batoche and the paternalistic manipulation of Ottawa.

Wiebe is not shy about describing Batoche and what happened there, although we must remember that he is telling that story from the Métis perspective. He provides details on military organization within nineteenth-century armies and distinguishes clearly between the strategies of marching infantry in red coats and the trench warfare (*avant la lettre*) of the guerrilla troops that Dumont and Riel had mustered. He knows that the Gatling gun, precursor to twentieth-century weaponry, was first used at Batoche, and he notes the desperate need of the Métis men to protect their women and children against marauding Canadian soldiers. But perhaps most importantly, Wiebe weighs the man of thought against the man of action — Riel against Dumont — and finds both insufficient. His

final answer to this dilemma — how do you build a nation? with vision or violence? — is to give Dumont the last word. As we know, Gabriel Dumont survived Batoche, after Riel's surrender, by fleeing south and eventually joining Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show in the United States. But Wiebe brings him back to life to pronounce his verdict, not on Riel or on Macdonald, but on Canada: "You think Riel is finished? He said a hundred years is just a spoke in the wheel of eternity. We'll remember. A hundred years and whites still won't know what to do with him ... There's no white country can hold a man with a vision like Riel" (351). More than 125 years have passed since Riel died, and Canadian artists are still trying to invent him and the country.

Of all the plays written about Riel, John Coulter's three attempts to dramatize the story are probably the most famous. *The Death of Louis Riel*, in two parts, premiered in Toronto in 1950 with the incomparable Mavor Moore as Riel. The third play, *The Trial of Louis Riel*, was commissioned by the Regina Chamber of Commerce in 1966 and became a regularly produced summer tourist attraction. Coulter, an Irishman who had emigrated to Canada in 1936, saw Riel as a Canadian myth and represented him as a universal figure of the hero fighting oppression — a rather Irish take on this Canadian subject (see Garay). Nevertheless, Coulter's work was theatrically sound, and his Riel has had a lasting impact on our inventions of the man and his cause. The single most important result of his Riel plays was in fact the opera based on his work, called *Louis Riel* and composed by Harry Somers as a 1967 commission by the Canadian Opera Company, with libretto by Mavor Moore and Jacques Languiand. Because this was a centennial project, the choice of Riel as its subject was a major endorsement of him as a national *Canadian* icon, and yet Moore's comments on Riel underscore the complexity of Riel's significance: he incarnates many ideas, according to Moore, from "idealist" driven mad by the hard realities of politics to a Hamlet-like thinker who is indecisive,

to the quintessential “half-breed” outsider who does not really belong in either world, to the heroic leader of his Métis people.¹⁶ Somers’ “multi-level composition” also captures the métissage of the title character by mixing folk tunes with abstract, atonal orchestration for “dramatic intensity,” diatonic passages for irony or humour, and even electronically produced sounds to allow voices to surround the audience.¹⁷ Riel’s frenzied vision in the insane asylum, when he believes he is a type of the biblical David who has God’s orders to lead his people, is an especially powerful musical expression of visionary madness. This episode in Riel’s life is represented by most writers who take up the story, but opera is the ideal vehicle for conveying the passion and fully embodied symbolism of the moment. Here, at least in artistic invention, we can hear the voice of Louis David Riel.

Louis Riel, the opera, was very well received at its 1967 premiere and was broadcast later that year by the CBC. It was revived in 1968, televised by the CBC in 1969, and then ignored at home until January 2005 when the School of Music at McGill performed it at Salle Wilfrid Pelletier as part of its centenary celebrations (an interesting return to Quebec of this francophone icon). I have never seen it performed and must, therefore, limit my remarks, but in listening to the recording and studying the libretto, I am impressed by its highly contemporary resonance and vitality. Although I had anticipated a degree of political incorrectness in its representation of Riel, the Métis, and questions of race relations, I think the libretto is more progressive than not; three languages are required (French, English, and Cree), and Riel himself is a sympathetic figure, even though he is portrayed as every bit as stubborn as Macdonald. Moore deftly counterpoints both men’s uncompromising characters by having each one say “I cannot let one foolish man stand in the way of a whole nation.” Riel is speaking of Thomas Scott, the crude, violent Ontario

Orangeman who is executed by the Métis provisional government, while Macdonald is speaking of Riel. The point seems to be that both men were trapped by their times and their vision, and that the man with the greater economic and military power won the battle, if not the larger war of defining the nation. Although the libretto does not provide a final judgment on either Riel or Macdonald, the composite effect of the score, the libretto, the use of English, and the staging in the final scenes suggests there are two winners: on one side of the stage, we have Riel at his trial and execution; on the other, we have Ottawa, presided over by its canny prime minister. This sets up a number of crucial juxtapositions that, in performance, invite the audience to do the judging. Riel will appear as both sane and honourable, a prophet with a vision and a cause — human rights. Macdonald will appear to be duplicitous, vengeful, and possibly stupid (or at least short-sighted). The French language used extensively in the opera is drowned out at the end and scorned in English. And perhaps most disturbing, the English used by Riel when he speaks at his trial contrasts dramatically with the hysterical screaming of the English-speaking mob and with the vulgarity of John Schultz’s words *snarled* (not sung) at the end: “The God damn son-of-a-bitch is dead.” But of course Riel is not dead. He and his vision are still alive. This portrait of Riel may not be fully in step with the past twenty-five years of Rielisms, but grand opera is grand opera, and the political and ethical message of the work is no more dated than Wagner’s *Ring* or Verdi’s *Nabucco*.

Before I leave Riel and the theatre, however, there is one more play that I want to consider — Rex Deverell’s *Beyond Batoche*. Unlike Coulter, Somers, Moore, and Languirand, Deverell is a Saskatchewan playwright whose play was written in 1985 to be premiered in Regina’s Globe Theatre — on Batoche and Métis home ground — and the time and place matter. What Coulter could do in 1950 and the opera could do in

the late sixties as a Canadian centenary event, Deverell simply could not attempt. Too much had changed. So, in this play, the playwright character, Matt, dramatizes the struggle of the writer to invent a credible Louis Riel as a visionary and a hero — but the writer fails. In desperation he consults with a Métis woman about the current realities of Métis life, but in the final analysis, he capitulates to the producer, who demands a whitewash of Macdonald. As Matt delivers the climactic speech he has written for Macdonald, he discovers himself sympathizing with the victor, not the victim, whom he calls in this speech an “ignorant, savage, half-breed from the North West” (425). The play ends with the playwright transformed into the tour guide at the Batoche National Historic Site, where presumably he may learn more about the history he was trying to turn into theatre. The audience, however, already has Deverell’s point: if we do not acknowledge the racism informing our history, we will not understand the contemporary consequences of that violent legacy, and we certainly have no right to capitalize on that history, to turn men like Riel into box-office commodities. Before Matt is defeated by his own ignorance and biases, Deverell allows him to provide one crucial insight into the whole process of inventing icons. When Yvonne, the Métis woman who is trying to teach him, asks why he wants to invent Riel, he replies, “I don’t think anybody’s ever gotten to the bottom of Riel’s religion. He was a mystic and a prophet and a visionary — and what does it say about Canadians that our one outstanding frontier hero is this really eccentric volatile religious revolutionary? What does that say about us?” (406).

Deverell’s writer/character is not able to answer this question. And perhaps this is the wrong question. Perhaps Riel’s meaning lies elsewhere, and by reinventing him, we keep creating him in our own image, but this is precisely why figures such as Riel (and Carr, Thomson, and Hubbard) are so important: they do say something about being Canadian, but that

something never stays put and cannot be finalized or resolved into stable, coherent definitions.¹⁸

A more recent artistic attempt to make sense of Riel’s inventions was the 2001 exhibition held at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, where sculptures, paintings, drawings, and multi-media works from the past thirty years were gathered for display. The show and the catalogue were called *Rielisms*, and much of the art exhibited was by Métis artists, but the curators did go back to John Boyle’s 1974–75 *Batoche Series* and to the public sculptures of Riel dating from the late sixties to capture the range of meanings attributed to him. In her introduction to the catalogue, Catherine Mattes notes that Riel continues to be a controversial figure, and she reminds us (quoting Claude Rocan) that Canadians’ interpretations of Riel are a “window into the Canadian psyche” (13). For Boyle, who also invented Tom Thomson in several of his works, Riel is a national symbol of Canadian history and inclusiveness, and his status as Métis serves a larger Canadian story of valour and resistance. In his *Batoche — Louis David* (see Figure 28), Riel unifies land and city, Indian and non-Indian, his very image combining the hybridity that Boyle celebrates. Marcien Lemay’s sculpture (see Figure 27), created in 1968 for the grounds of the Manitoba legislature, became such a focus of outrage and debate that it was removed by the 1990s, and a much more heroic sculpture was erected in its place. Lemay’s expressionist interpretation of Riel as a tormented individual stripped down to his essentials offended the Métis, and there is small doubt that it does not present Riel as heroic or as a leader. The statue that now stands in its place, by Miguel Joyal, shows a dignified, classic representation of Riel as a statesman holding the Manitoba Bill of Rights. This rendition may not be as interesting as *sculpture*, but it is certainly a more noble depiction of Riel. Considered together, the two works seem to defy the expectation that they represent the same man, and yet they do: Lemay’s Riel is the private, inner man; it



FIGURE 27 Marcien Lemay, *Louis Riel* (1968). Lemay's sculpture was unveiled in 1971, but after considerable debate and controversy over its depiction of an important figure such as Riel, it was moved from the legislative grounds to those of the Collège Universitaire de St. Boniface in 1995. Reproduced courtesy of the college.

is his soul we see. Joyal's is the public man, a politician, a universally recognizable figure of authority.¹⁹

My last image of Riel is from a work by Cree/Chipewyan artist Jane Ash Poitras for whom Riel "is a shamanic hero who died at the hands of an unjust, colonizing government" (20). This large collage and mixed-media work (see Figure 29), called *Riel Reality* (2000), is typical of Poitras' style. The style and mixed media seem entirely appropriate for her

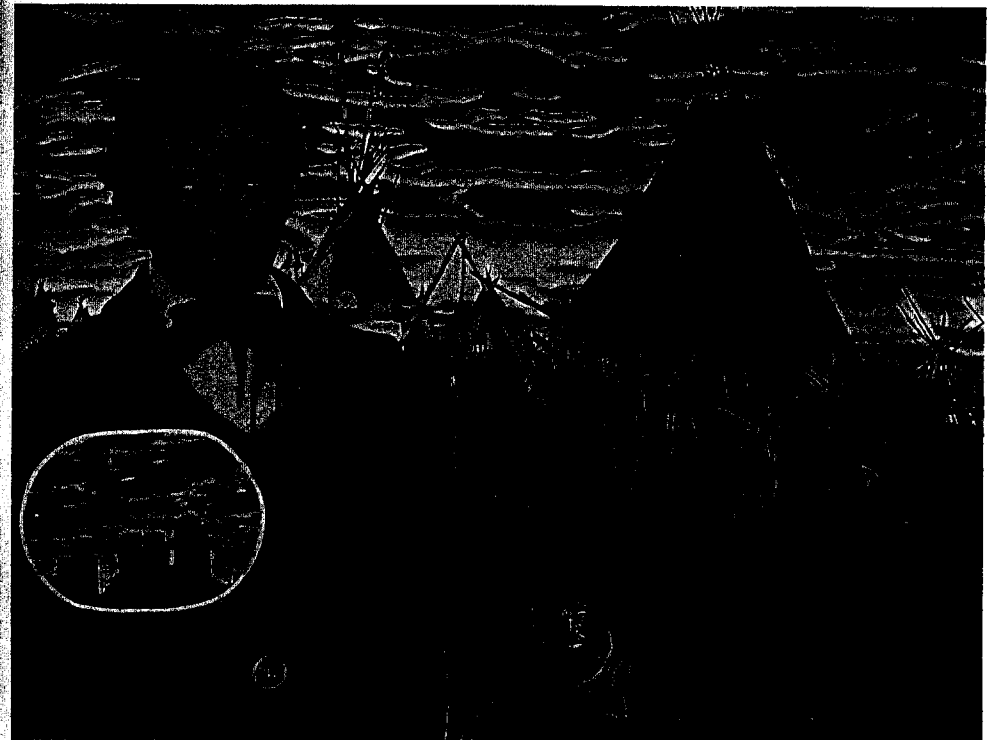


FIGURE 28 John Boyle, *Batoche-Louis David* (1975), acrylic on masonite and wood, 91.4 x 121.9 cm. The face of Riel in this painting is based on a photograph taken when he was a teenager, but the intense gaze evokes the more familiar photograph and hence the end of Riel's story (see Figure 25). Photograph by Morton Perlman. Reproduced with the permission of the artist and the Canadian Artists' Representation Copyright Collective. © John Boyle.



FIGURE 29 Jane Ash Poitras, *Riel Reality* (2000), mixed media on canvas, 122 x 173 cm. Poitras has created many powerful collage narratives of First Nations life and history in which she juxtaposes images of Native culture, spirituality, and pride with images of white repression and persecution and the trauma caused by such treatment. This piece appeared in the Winnipeg Art Gallery exhibition and catalogue called *Rielisms*. It is reproduced with the permission of the artist. © Jane Ash Poitras.

invention of Riel as one man among many, all figured within a landscape that is both real (recognizably a prairie landscape) and symbolic, belonging to the past and yet haunting the present. Her use of archival photographs emphasizes, for me, the sense of haunting and inhabiting that her works always create, so that the closer you look, the more you see, the more there is to see in her landscape/portraits. But what Poitras does so eloquently with canvas and photography, Sherry Farrell Racette does with words in the essay that closes *Rielisms*. Her title really says it all: "Metis Man or Canadian Icon: Who Owns Louis Riel?" Racette, who is Métis, summarizes the various roles that Riel has been asked to play at different points in Canadian history and then isolates what, for me, is the key to Riel, something that is usually avoided or elided: he was biracial and his biracial identity was the source of his stigma in the past, of his taboo quality and aura of mystery from roughly 1967 to the mid-nineties, and the sign of his current power for the Métis, who are proud of their mixed-race identity. In Racette's words, "This image of Riel as the conflicted embodiment of the savage and the civilized has echoed throughout the telling of Canada's history" (47). If I were to write that fourth chapter I mentioned in my introduction — the one about contemporary Canada's multiracial, multicultural identity — I would do well to begin with Louis Riel as an example of what Michelle La Flamme might call the "soma text" of being Canadian.²⁰

III ON BEING A FEMALE CANADIAN: EMILY CARR

Fewer plays have been written about Emily Carr than about Riel, and thus far there is no opera, but then, she has not been dead as long as he has, and artists need time to create their inventions.²¹ Nonetheless, a lot of invention has been going on, and Carr was the first to invent herself in her autobiographies — *The Book of Small*, *The House of All Sorts*, *Klee*

- 32 This term, which is Pierre Nora's, suggests a place, space, or physical site of remembrance; however, it does not necessarily refer to the best possible conjunction of memory and history, which, for Nora, would be a *milieu de mémoire*, that is, an environment or place for the shared experience of remembering. But it strikes me that, during its creation and later at its 1936 and 2007 dedications, with living Canadians gathered to participate actively and communally in remembrance, Allward's monument is at least a lieu de mémoire and that it comes close to fulfilling Nora's ideal state of milieu.

CHAPTER 3: INVENTING ICONIC FIGURES

- 1 The writing of biography and autobiography in Canada has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention, and Canadians have been slow to write biographies of intellectuals and artists, but biography in its many forms (from newspaper obits to encyclopedias, and from edited series to substantial monographs) contributes enormously to the development of national identity. This is not the place to undertake a discussion of life-writing, but I do wish to stress my view that biography is a narrative creation, a story about a biographee, and that, as such, biography invents a life by deploying factual information and data; for example, photographs are not unmediated real objects but staged images *used* by a writer to interpret a life and to support a version of the life story. I discuss some of these issues in *Inventing Tom Thomson* and in my introduction to *Making Theatre: A Life of Sharon Pollock*.
- 2 Franklin continues to be the subject of literary representation and archaeological searches. This fascination may not abate until traces are found of his ships and explanations agreed upon for the failure of his third expedition; see Grace, "Re-inventing Franklin."
- 3 Bishop is one of the hometown heroes celebrated on billboards and plaques in Owen Sound, together with Tom Thomson and Norman Bethune.
- 4 Rightly or wrongly, Canadian soldiers are rarely celebrated as heroic, although Dallaire may, with time, prove the exception to this Canadian reluctance to transform military men into icons. A film based on his memoir, *Shake Hands with the Devil*, appeared in 2007, other films and books are in process, and, through his public lectures, he has become a champion of urgent causes such as the plight of child soldiers. In her play about the historical figure of Major James Walsh of the North-West Mounted Police, Sharon Pollock portrays the man as a moral failure rather than as a hero; the hero of her play, if there is one, is Sitting Bull.
- 5 The most widely known of these representations is the 1990 film *Bethune*, starring Donald Sutherland in the title role. Rod Langley and Ken Mitchell have written plays about Bethune called *Bethune* and *Gone the Burning Sun*. By far the most fascinating invention of Bethune to date is the man created through an imagined autobiography in Bock's novel. Perhaps Bethune is not yet a *Canadian*

- icon because so much of his heroic work took place outside the country, in Spain and China, where he is revered as a national hero and where he died. However, it may also be — as Bock's title insists — because of his political beliefs. Can it be that Canadians will deny a person iconic status, regardless of his or her achievements, on the grounds of being a communist?
- 6 A special *livre d'artiste* limited edition of Atwood's poems, with illustrations by Charles Pachter, was published in 1997. Moodie has been much written about by biographers, documentary filmmakers, and editors; her main Canadian books are still in print.
 - 7 I am aware of at least two plays on Aquash — Sharon Pollock's *The Making of Warriors* and Yvette Nolan's *Annie Mae's Movement* — and a recent NFB documentary film *The Spirit of Anna Mae*. See also La Flamme, "Indigenous Women Living beyond the Grave."
 - 8 I see Hubbard as a more convincing site for invention than either Johnson or Aquash for several reasons: her story has a good mix of elements (adventure, sensation, danger, gender transgression, gossip); her class and race make her less controversial than either Aquash or Johnson; and her connection with the lore of masculine northern exploration puts her on the margins of a perennially topical subject. Nevertheless, once the opera about Pauline Johnson has been premiered, this state of things could shift quickly; Johnson-as-icon is still a work in progress.
 - 9 See biographies by Bazzana and Friedrich, as well as fictional treatments by Wynne-Jones and Young. The most evocative and inventive of the documentary films is *Glenn Gould Hereafter*, which, as its title suggests, constructs its portrait of Gould with future iconicity in mind.
 - 10 *The Rocket*, Binamé's feature film on the life of Maurice Richard (1921-2000), has enshrined Richard as the emblem of Quebec in rebellion against anglophone Canada. In 1955, when Richard was suspended for the entire season by then NHL president Clarence Campbell, a riot broke out in the Montreal Forum. This so-called Rocket Richard Riot has come to be seen as the symbolic start to the Quebec nationalist movement. The most delightful fictional treatment of Richard is Roch Carrier's famous short story "The Hockey Sweater."
 - 11 I disagree in some respects with Woodcock's assessment of the icons or heroes we choose. Although I agree that Canadians "distrust heroes" and prefer "martyrs" (10), I am not convinced that our choice of Riel over Dumont can be fully explained in this way. Riel is the more complex, ambiguous, and mysterious figure, and in these respects, he has much in common with Carr and Thomson. I believe that, unlike American heroes who swagger and exist in black and white, Canadian icons are mutable, flexible, and three-dimensional; we can take pride in them without being dominated by them, and they can be invented to serve a variety of purposes.
 - 12 This biography may well bring Riel to the attention of a whole new generation of Canadian readers. My students tell me that one can get Riel comic-strip

- T-shirts based on this book and that Riel is becoming the Che Guevara of Canada. Time will tell if this is so and, if it is, what view the Métis might hold of the phenomenon.
- 13 Brown was interviewed on CBC radio *Arts Tonight* by Eleanor Wachtel on 25 January 2005 in conjunction with her discussion of the McGill University School of Music's revival of Harry Somers' opera *Louis Riel*.
 - 14 In the context of my discussion, 1930 stands out as an important date because, during that year, Massey gave his lecture on art and nationality, Voaden published his manifesto for Canadian theatre, and the Labine brothers discovered uranium ore at Great Bear Lake. But 1977 is unparalleled for the number of important Canadian books that appeared that year, including Findley's *The Wars*, Robertson's *A Terrible Beauty*, and Wiebe's *The Scorched-Wood People*.
 - 15 Creighton stressed the importance of the St. Lawrence River and the eastward trading connection with European markets as the definitive conditions of Canadian history and life, but Morton saw the West and the North as equally, if not more, important to the identity of the country.
 - 16 In their study of this opera, Linda and Michael Hutcheon find it ironic that Riel was chosen as a centennial subject and suggest that the opera provides a basically ironic view of Canada as a nation. In my view, Riel, the man, embodied many of the struggles still faced in this country, and the opera's "Riel" represents the complexity and ambiguity (possibly also the irony) that defines it.
 - 17 These comments and descriptions are quoted from the extensive notes provided with the full libretto that accompanies the recording of the work made at the 1975 revival produced at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. Canadian tenor Bernard Turgeon sang the role of Riel.
 - 18 All art has the potential to evoke and utilize ambiguity, but it seems to me that twentieth-century Canadian art is especially characterized by the productive uncertainties that I read as ambiguity.
 - 19 Other sculptures, by John Nugent, have been made of Riel; they were commissioned for the Saskatchewan legislature. See Mattes, *Rielisms* 28-29.
 - 20 In her dissertation, La Flamme develops the concept of "soma text" to explain how this process functions in a number of works by biracial writers and playwrights.
 - 21 Several plays have been written about Carr; see Nothof.
 - 22 See studies by Blanchard, Laurence, Shadbolt, and Tippet, and Carr's autobiographical works in *The Complete Writings*. Various fictional treatments of Carr have been written (see Barton, Braid, and Vreeland). The name of the Victoria street on which Carr lived, and where the Carr family home still stands, has been changed from Carr to Government Street, and the sign outside the house itself is small and undistinguished. There is no indication that she was an artist of distinction, let alone of national reputation.
 - 23 Udall sees Carr's trees as forms of self-portraiture, and Murray makes a similar suggestion about Tom Thomson's trees.

- 24 See Little's 1970 book and my discussion of his efforts in *Inventing Tom Thomson* (37-48).
- 25 In stressing the general context of the First World War as the background and source of possible motivation behind Thomson's death, Poling notes Thomson's efforts to enlist (although these claims have been disputed). In addition, he reminds us that Billy Bishop, that other Owen Sound boy, was gaining fame in the summer of 1917 as a fighter pilot, and he describes Mark Robinson, the park ranger who was wounded at Vimy and returned home still limping. Then he concludes that "the war would have been the major topic of discussion on the evening of July 7th, 1917" (54) — the night when a group of men, including Thomson, Shannon Fraser, and Martin Bletcher Jr., were drinking and arguing in a cabin at Canoe Lake, and the night before Thomson disappeared.
- 26 See Nora and my discussion of this term in Chapter 2.
- 27 Clark Espinal covered the floor of the room with potted narcissus, and along the walls she hung framed pages from the Town and Silcox book. The total effect was commemorative and uncanny, real (in the sense that the plants and images were recognizable and *real*) and yet totally non-real or constructed.
- 28 Even before she left on her expedition, the newspapers of the day were publishing sensational reports about her plans and motivations; she was described as the suspicious widow out to prove foul play and as the frail little woman trying to compete with Dillon Wallace (who had been with Leonidas on the first fatal expedition and survived). She was, in short, not taken seriously and was criticized for undertaking such an unfeminine task as northern exploration. When she returned claiming success, she was not believed at first, and then, when her success was irrefutable, the task itself was downplayed to a canoeing holiday. I have discussed the reception and context for Mina's 1905 expedition and the attention she continued to receive once the book appeared in my introduction to the 2004 edition of *A Woman's Way*.
- 29 As I write, at least three films are being made about Mina Benson Hubbard. The 2007 film about Mina and Leonidas Hubbard, directed by Jacques Bouffard, aired as episode 12 of the Radio Canada series *Canada en Amour*.
- 30 During my visit to North West River, I was impressed with the strong sense of community identity and pride evident among both the settler and indigenous populations. Many of the liveyers spoke eagerly about their memories of Mina and their views about her character and place in their history. They were welcoming to those of us from away, but they were also patiently skeptical about our ability to understand Labrador or to appreciate the full significance of their history.

EPILOGUE: LISTENING FOR THE HEARTBEAT OF A COUNTRY

- 1 Pollock has written several plays that address war and genocide, beginning with *Walsh* in 1973 and, most recently, with *Man Out of Joint*, which premiered in