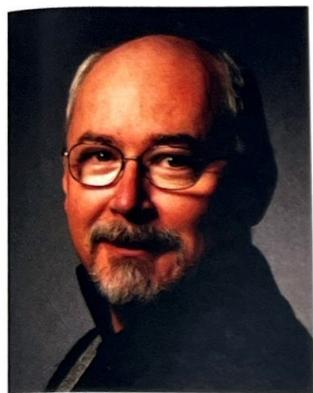


## THE RIEL ESSAY



Member, Vincent Graves Greene Philatelic Expertising Committee Immediate Past President, The Royal Philatelic Society of Canada.

Collector, philatelic writer, judge and organizer. Chairman of the Organizing Committee of Ottawa's National Philatelic Exhibition (1988-1992), Chairman of ROYAL \* 1993 \* ROYALE, and Founding Chairman of Canada's National Philatelic Literature Exhibition (1991 to date). Internationally qualified judge in Traditional, Postal History, Literature and Youth. Assistant Secretary to the Jury at Singapore '95 and Secretary to the Jury at CAPEX '96, PHILEXFRANCE '99 and BELGICA '06. Member of the Jury at PACIFIC '97, STAMPSHOW 2000 and PACIFIC EXPLORER '05. President, The Royal Philatelic Society of Canada (2006-2006), President of the American Association of Philatelic Exhibitors (1998-2002) and President, Eire Philatelic Association (1993-7). President of the Friends of the Canadian Postal Museum.



Figure 1: Louis Riel, leader of the Provisional Government of Manitoba for whom the essays are named.

Rebel leader and rehabilitated hero, Louis Riel, (1844-1885) gave his name to a rare Canadian philatelic item: the Riel Essay (Figure 1). Although he is not portrayed on the non-issued stamp, it is purported issued by the 1869-70 Provisional Government of Manitoba that he led. This period in Manitoba history is also known as the First Riel Rebellion. Riel was ambitious, well educated and bilingual with a charismatic personality that saw him emerge as a leader among the Métis of the Red River Settlement—present day Winnipeg. Riel's provisional government would eventually negotiate the Manitoba Act with the Canadian government. The Act established Manitoba as a province and provided some protection for French language rights. Later, in 1885, he would lead a Métis rebellion in Batoche, Saskatchewan as a result of which he would be tried for treason and hanged that year. Although there is no conclusive proof that Riel's government prepared the essay, it has a life of its own in Canadian philately and has enough of a status for the Vincent Graves Greene Philatelic Research Foundation (VGG) to issue expertization certificates for essays sent in to them. One such is the unrecorded item submitted to the VGG in January 2006 by the Toronto auction house of Maresch & Son (Figure 2).



Figure 2: The newly discovered Riel Essay on piece. Although the essay is genuine it does not belong on the newspaper fragment. Courtesy of the Vincent Graves Greene Philatelic Research Foundation.



Figure 3: The provisional Government of Manitoba's only Postmaster General, A. G. B. Bannatyne.

Riel's provisional government did include a postmaster general, Andrew Graham Ballenden Bannatyne (1829-1889). Bannatyne, a prominent businessman and Hudson's Bay Company employee and magistrate, had previously been appointed postmaster of the colony in 1862 (Figure 3). His provisional government appointment was a continuation of his previous position, albeit after a slight hiatus of a few months after he was sacked in the first days of Riel's government. Supporters of the Riel Essay use the appointment to support their belief that, with an independent post office, the next logical step was the production of postage stamps. The exact time of production for these woodcut essays has never been determined and some theories will be examined later on in this article.

At an early February 2006 meeting of the VGG's Expert Committee, I was asked to review the unrecorded red Riel Essay on newspaper piece submitted for expert review (Figure 2). Although, at a glance, I believed the essay to be genuine, the focus of my research was on whether the essay belonged on the newspaper fragment it was submitted on.

For this purpose, I reviewed the philatelic literature on Riel Essays in general and found no reference whatsoever to the item submitted. Most of the material I looked at was provided by Keith Spencer, Ph.D., FRPSC, a noted collector of Riel material and owner of genuine green and red copies of the essay (Figure 4). In the mid-1980s, Dr. Spencer had consulted with Bruce Peel, Chief Librarian of the University of Alberta and historian Rod McLeod, from the same university. Although the concern of all three was to find out whether the essays were genuine and whether they were issued by Riel's Provisional Governments of 1869-1870 in the Red River Settlement or of 1885 in Batoche, SK, their written comments gave additional clues that were extremely useful for my review. They mentioned the need to read Alexander Begg's *Red River Journal and other Papers relating to the Red River Resistance, 1869-70* (Champlain Society, 1956) and Dr. Peel's own book, *Early Printing in the Red River Settlement, 1859-1870*. This I did. In addition, I consulted with the Archives of the Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba as well as Library and Archives Canada and the Libraries of the Universities of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

There are a number of clues on the fragment of newspaper illustrated in Figure 2 that could possibly help trace its origin. The information between brackets is presumed to be the missing letters:

*Front*

(L)A REPUBLI(QUE) = Name of the newspaper  
JOURNAL HEBDOMAD(AIRE) = Frequency of publication  
Publiée tous les vendred(i)  
Vendredi, 27 août = Date of Publication

*Reverse*

(Journ)al (Heb)domadaire = Frequency of publication  
(DE)UX CENTINS = Price per copy



Figure 4: Dr. Spencer's red Riel Essay. Courtesy Dr. Keith Spencer.

There are a number of reasons why the item could be genuine. The high quality, texture and typeface of this weekly newspaper fragment seem to be consistent with newspapers published at the period and earlier. Later newspapers tended to be produced on more acidic newsprint. The price of the newspaper—deux centins—is also consistent with the price of newspapers of the period. The term centins, meaning cents had become somewhat archaic by that time but was still being used colloquially in Quebec and many other Francophone areas of the world. A weekly publication schedule was the norm for newspapers in smaller jurisdictions.

However, there are more solid historical reasons why the essay does not belong on the newspaper fragment on which it appears.

1. Although August 27 was a Friday in 1869, the Red River Rebellion did not start before late October 1869.
2. There was no newspaper in Western Canada at the time called *La République*. In fact, I was unable to find any newspaper in Canada with that name in the middle of the 19th Century or early 20th Century.
3. Prior to, and during the Rebellion there were only two newspapers published in the Winnipeg/Fort Garry area; the *Red River Pioneer* later to become the *New Nation* and the *Nor'Wester*, and they all had spotty publication records during the period of the provisional government.
4. If the Riel Essays themselves are a genuine product of the Provisional Government of Manitoba, most historians believe that they would have been printed in January 1870. This is after the purported use—August 27, 1869—of the item under consideration. In addition, August 27 was not a Friday in either 1870 or 1885. In any event, for many reasons, it is now virtually certain that the essays, if genuine, were not issued in 1885 during the Second Riel Rebellion.
5. There is no record of a Francophone publisher, printer or journalist in the Winnipeg/Fort Garry area at the time. One with a good command of the language would have been needed to produce this high quality newspaper.

I therefore reported to the VGG Expert Committee that it was my considered opinion that with current knowledge, the essay was a genuine red Riel Essay but that it did not belong on the fragment of newspaper it is found on. I believe the newspaper fragment is contemporary to the mid or last part of the 19th Century and is likely taken from a newspaper printed in France or, less likely, another European Francophone country. The VGG issued a certificate stating that the essay was genuine but that it "has become affixed to a scrap of newspaper that is not of Canadian origin". Maresch & Son sold it on June 27 (Sale 413, lot 442) with the following description. RIEL REBELLION ESSAY in red, bilingual inscription 'REPUBLIQUE CANADIENNE / CANADIAN REPUBLIC', affixed to piece of newspaper in French, most interesting and hitherto unrecorded, very fine SHOWPIECE with 2006 Greene cert. It was estimated at \$2000 CAD and sold for \$1200 CAD.

No conclusive survey has ever been made of the number of Riel Essays in existence but there are likely at this time a dozen or more including three green and one black essay. All the others are red or red brown. The first record I could find of the Riel Essay is in Fred Jarrett's B.N.A. Book "Stamps of British North America" in which he states that one copy was held by "the Catholic Hierarchy, St. Boniface, Manitoba". The first illustrated example is found in an article by the same author in the May 1935 issue of *The American Philatelist* (Vol. 48, no. 7, pp. 393-4). It is described as "head of Liberty, Imperf., Dull Carmine, Lithograph, On Poor Quality Wove Paper" and is recorded in the collection of Prof. John B. Ekeley, of the University of Colorado. In the same article we read that sometime between 1929 and 1935 church authorities informed Jarrett "no knowledge or



Figure 5: The only recorded watermark copy showing the letters "AT". Courtesy of Don Fraser with photo and scan by Rick Penka.

record of such a stamp existed in the church records". By 1944, five copies had been recorded, seven by 1958 and ten by 1987. The new discoveries since 1944 are all red or shades thereof since two green copies were known by 1944. Over the years, many philatelic writers have commented on the likely existence of a black copy of the essay but all have indicated that they had never seen one. In October 2005, I discovered it along with a green and a red essay in The Royal Philatelic Collection. One red copy is the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Alberta and at least one of the red copies is printed on watermarked paper bearing the letters "AT" (Figure 5).

The timing and production of these Riel Essays has always been open to conjecture. As far as I can ascertain, four possible theories have been mooted in the past. I will write about these and add a fifth possibility. Three are rooted in the 1860s, one in 1885 and one at the turn of the 20th Century.

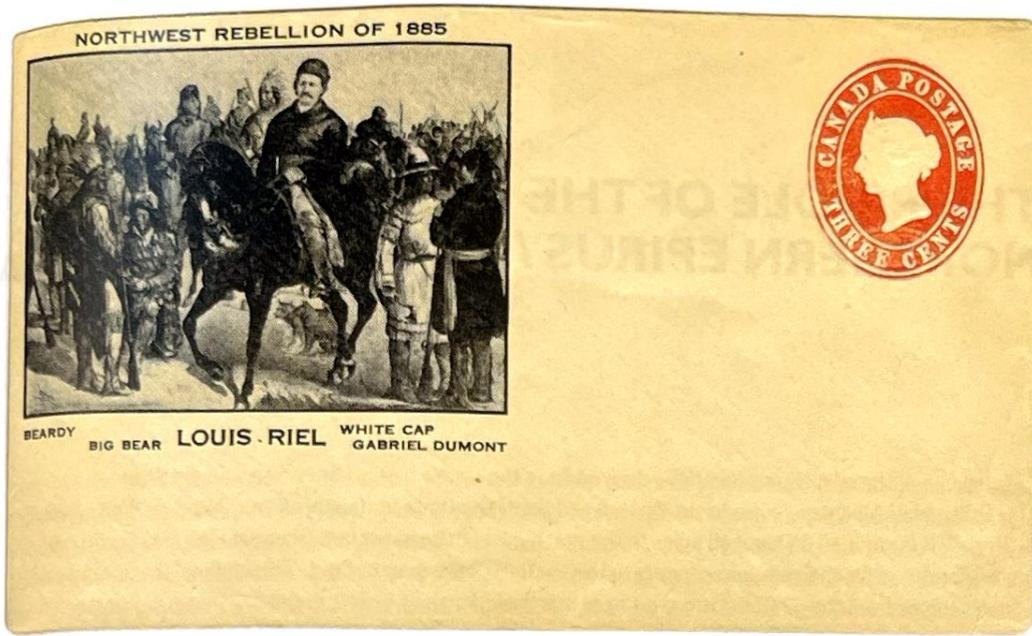
One theory is that the essays are a product of the fertile mind of Samuel Allan Taylor, a major producer of cinderellas in the 1860s. I agree with David Sessions who writes in his *Philatelic Fantasies of British North America, 1860-1910* (Charles G. Firby, Waterford, 1999), "The design (of a female head with a Phrygian bonnet) is a crudely drawn woodcut and does not measure up to the standard of known Taylor products." Sessions goes on to say, "If the stamp was produced at the time of the First Riel rebellion (1869) then it would have been well within Taylor's prolific period, but so few copies exist that it doesn't suggest one of his commercial products." A third reason is that Taylor's price lists and advertisements make no mention stamp.

The second theory is that they are a product of Thomas Spence's "Republic of Manitoba". In the early 1860s the community of Portage La Prairie was within the Hudson's Bay territory of Rupert's Land but was under jurisdiction of the government and Council of Assiniboia, so the settlers formed their own local council. Spence and other businessmen persuaded the local settlers to form their own republic. In 1867, the "Republic of Manitoba" was established, but it was dissolved one year later. It was also known as the "Republic of Portage La Prairie". The Manitoba Historical Society believes that Spence's "built on a shaky foundation ... (and) ... was almost a comical experiment." In light of these comments of the stories surrounding the Republic, it seems unlikely that it was a serious or determined to issue its own stamps.

The third and currently held theory is the one on which this article is based. Namely, the stamps were sometime in early 1870 after Bannatyne was appointed Postmaster General of the Provisional. An additional reason for the popularity of this theory is that there was a woodcut artist in Fort Garry at the time.

The fourth theory is that the essays are a product of Riel's second attempt at Rebellion in Batoche, Northern Saskatchewan in 1885 (Figure 6). Since the Rebellion lasted but two months and was marred by fighting, it is highly unlikely that Riel's government would have had the time, the interest or the wherewithal to print stamps.

I would like to advance a fifth theory that needs far more research. I suspect that the essays could have been prepared in the late 1890s, possibly by a Winnipeg stamp dealer called O. "Original" Kendall. There are a



THE RIEL ESSAY

Figure 6: Cachet showing Riel and his followers in 1885 on an 1888 stationery envelope made from laid paper with batonné lines 24 mm. apart. Formerly in the collection of Fred Jarrett. Courtesy Dr. Keith Spencer.

number of factors to support this. One of the two essays on piece is used from Montreal in 1901 or 1902 (Figure 7); the three essays in The Royal Philatelic Collection are mounted on a sheet of paper inscribed First Issue 1897 (Figure 8); and, the essay in Figure 2 could have been added to a European newspaper of the 1890s. The only years where August 27 is a Friday are 1869, 1875, 1886, 1897 and 1909. It is interesting to note that the 1897 year date matches the date in The Royal Philatelic Collection.

The origins of the Riel Essays may always remain a mystery but I am sure they will continue to interest collectors and researchers alike. I would like to hear from you if you have any information on this subject.

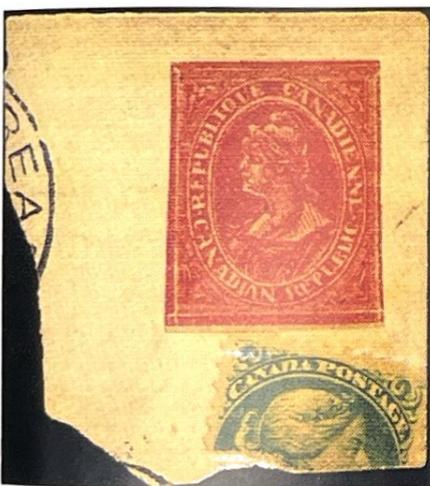


Figure 8: The newly discovered black essay with new green and red ones from The Royal Philatelic Collection. By gracious permission of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to whom copyright belongs.

Figure 7: The first recorded essay on piece said to have been used in 1901 or 1902. Courtesy John Jamieson - Saskatoon Stamp Centre.