

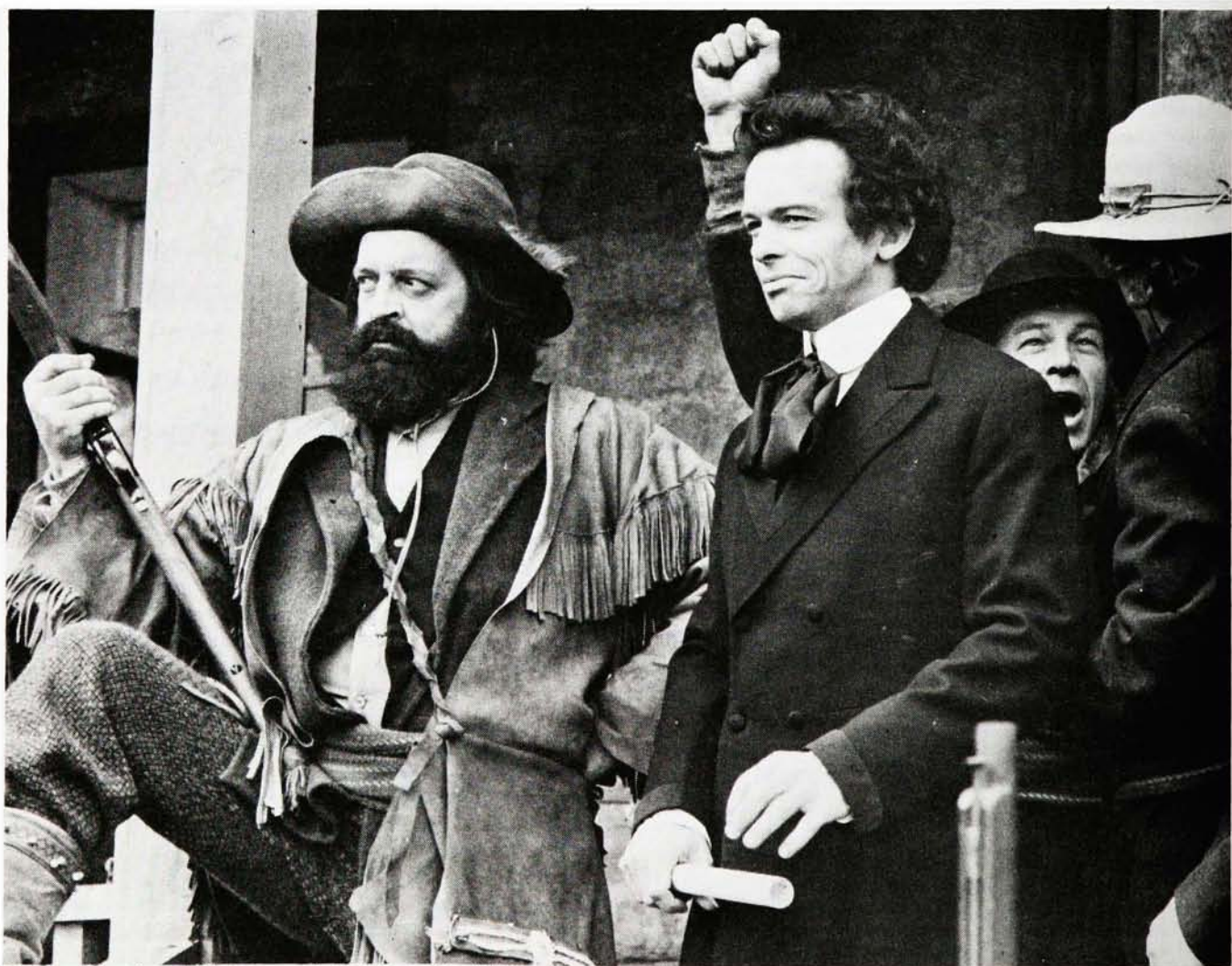
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# getting it right

by Anthony Hall

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The films vs the facts as told by Canadian historian, Anthony Hall. Or do *Marie-Anne* and *Riel* tell it like it was?



Raymond Cloutier as Riel is surrounded by Roger Blay (left) and Don Francis (right)

Canadian filmmakers are increasingly looking to our country's history for their inspiration. And the saga of the development of the Canadian West is naturally attracting much of their attention. *Marie-Anne*, a new feature produced by Edmonton's Fil Fraser, and the CBC's controversial *Riel*, are reflective of this trend. The stories the films tell present a very different kind of image of the American West than that made famous by Hollywood. But in charting new frontiers of history for the cinema, the makers of *Riel* and *Marie-Anne* have not come to terms with the full implications of the national heritage they are seeking to enrich. An analysis of the historical accuracy of these movies, explains why this is so.

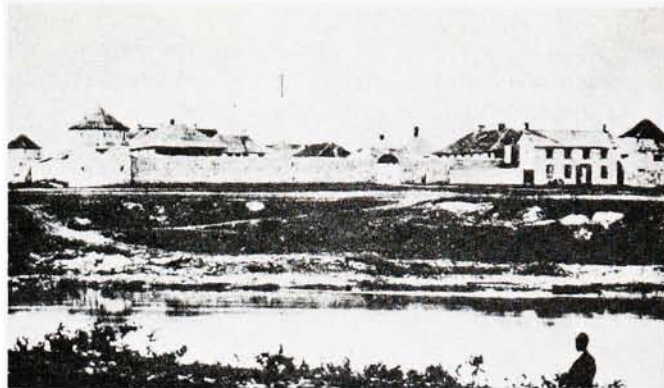
*Marie-Anne* is about an actual historical figure, Marie-Anne Gaboury, who was the first white woman to settle in the Canadian West. In 1806 she married the illustrious buffalo hunter, Jean-Baptiste Lagemodière, and left Lower Canada for the North Saskatchewan. Arriving a year later at Fort Edmonton, the young couple, now with child, found themselves threatened by Jean-Baptiste's madly jealous former Indian lover. *Marie-Anne's* plot is chiefly concerned with this love triangle.

Andrée Pelletier, the daughter of Canada's Ambassador to France, plays the title role in a sensitive, if emotionally limited, way. John Juliani is the rather archetypal male lead, while Tantoo Martin turns in a dynamic performance as the Indian girl caught between the conflicting mores of two different cultures. The camera work by Reg Morris is technically slick, and the film conveys an overall impression of exuberant vitality that is pleasing to behold. Unfortunately, however, *Marie-Anne* tends to distort rather than clarify understanding of the historical era in which the story is set.

Screen writer Marjorie Morgan has depended almost entirely on a few journals and diaries for the information that enabled her to recreate the story. The result is a plot that is faithful to many of the details of the main characters' lives, but which fails to capture the broader outlines of the historical developments taking place during the first decade of the nineteenth century. Nowhere is there the slightest illumination about the nature of the fur trade, which after all was the main enticement drawing Marie-Anne and Jean-Baptiste into the West. We are left completely ignorant of the epic struggle between the North West Company of Montreal and the Hudson's Bay Company. During Marie-Anne's early years in the West this trade war came to dominate many aspects of life, especially at Fort Edmonton where most of the film is set. This Hudson's Bay Company post was only "a musket shot" away from the North West Company's Fort Augustus, and yet we are told nothing of the face to face competition for the Indians' commerce.

A significant part of the story takes place across the vast expanse of wilderness between Lower Canada and Fort Edmonton. The filmmakers fail to convey, however, any convincing sense of the ruggedness, the diversity and the vastness of this land mass. Nor do they provide an authentic image of the ingenious transportation network that bound it together. Similarly, they fail to give even a glimpse of the fur trade's fascinating food support industry of which Jean-Baptiste, as a famous buffalo hunter, must have been an integral part.

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The original Fort Garry



Fort Garry on the Humber

The most obvious explanation for these shortcomings is the \$650,000 budget, which limited both the filmmakers' travelling and the ambitiousness of their historical recreations. I'm afraid a more fundamental problem, however, is their lack of familiarity with the epoch they are seeking to bring to life. To fill this vacuum of understanding, *Marie-Anne's* makers sometimes fall back on the tired clichés of "Hollywood's Canada." Indeed, they tend towards the escapist fantasies of the past that have long since become unfashionable in the American film capital. Uniformly attractive people are cast in both the major and the minor roles, and their laundry always has a fresh, crisp look. There is little evidence of the rich pigments of blood and hunger and disease and sweat that colored the country's early colonization.

One of the reasons for the hygienic texture of the film was the use of a tourist installation for its major set. The problems of shooting around reconstructed Fort Edmonton were outlined by *Marie-Anne's* first-time director, R. Martin Walters. Parking lots and neatly manicured lawns surround the fort. These had to be covered up and made suitably rustic, but only to the extent the Edmonton Parks Board would allow. Walters had special trouble with the Indian Village site, which was plowed for a railway just as he was beginning to shoot. Since *Marie-Anne* was filmed in late summer at the height of the tourist season, the crew's movements were limited and all filming had to be planned in close co-ordination with the scheduling of tours.

With a budget several times bigger than that for *Marie-Anne*, the makers of *Riel* have been able to avoid many of these problems. Almost every set was built from scratch, and art director Bill Beeton has done a commendable job of research to ensure that no detail of the backdrop is too wildly at variance with the historical facts. Reconstructed Fort Garry has, of course, been considerably scaled down from the original, and details of building design have been modified to facilitate the smooth flow of the story. Some sequences deemed to be deeply rooted in the public's consciousness, such as *Riel's* courtroom and hanging scenes, have been designed to precisely correspond with existing photographs. From all that one can tell from visiting the set, the general feel of the period seems to have been realistically recreated. Because *Riel* was shot in the early spring, the environment is powerfully raw and inhospitable. Mud is everywhere and smeared over everything. The homes, the costumes and the characters have that casual well-lived-in look that can only be achieved through studious attention to detail.

Most Canadians are far more familiar with the life story of Louis Riel than they are with that of Marie-Anne Lagemodière, who happens to have been the Métis leader's grandmother. The issues surrounding Riel's death have remained so controversial in fact, that for many they continue to relate closely to the key questions concerning Canada's future identity. It is ironic, then, that *Riel* is being brought to life in Metropolitan Toronto, the city that best symbolizes the anti-Catholic, anti-French centralizing forces that martyred the rebel chief. The production's geographic location, however, is not reflective of the story's historical perspective.

Roy Moore's famous \$100,000 script leans more towards the bias of Peter Charlebois (*The Life of Louis Riel*, Toronto, 1975) than that of Donald Creighton (*John A. Macdonald, The Old Chieftain*, Toronto, 1955). The former characterizes Riel as "first and foremost a patriotic Canadian", while the latter sees him as "a selfish, anarchic blackmailing adventurer." Another strong influence on the screen play has been George Woodcock's biography of Riel's closest ally, Gabriel Dumont (*Gabriel Dumont, The Métis Chief and His Lost World*, edmonton, 1975). Woodcock has become one of the foremost literary spokesmen of the movement advocating more autonomy for the regions and ethnic minorities in Canada — a view of the country that will be well represented by the CBC's \$1,500,000 extravaganza.

In spite of the extensive research that has clearly gone into the making of *Riel*, the plot sometimes deviates from the historical record. John A. Macdonald is depicted as Prime Minister during the time when Alexander Mackenzie was in power, for instance, and Bishop Bourget endures in the film beyond the actual date of his death. Such licence with the facts is justified, says *Riel's* producer John Trent, by the need to streamline the story's complexities in order to make for more effective dramatic presentation. Only when the production is complete can his judgment on matters like this be assessed.

An historical distortion of a more serious nature is the absence in the plot of any meaningful handling of the language issue. Of course this silence in a unilingual film is understandable. Any specific reference to the Métis winning, in 1871, the right to French language instruction in Manitoba's public schools, for instance, would have seemed ridiculous if announced by them in English. Trent tries to downgrade such difficulties by explaining that, like Sir Thomas More in *A Man For All Seasons*, the real conflict in which Riel was

caught was between Church and State rather than linguistic groups.

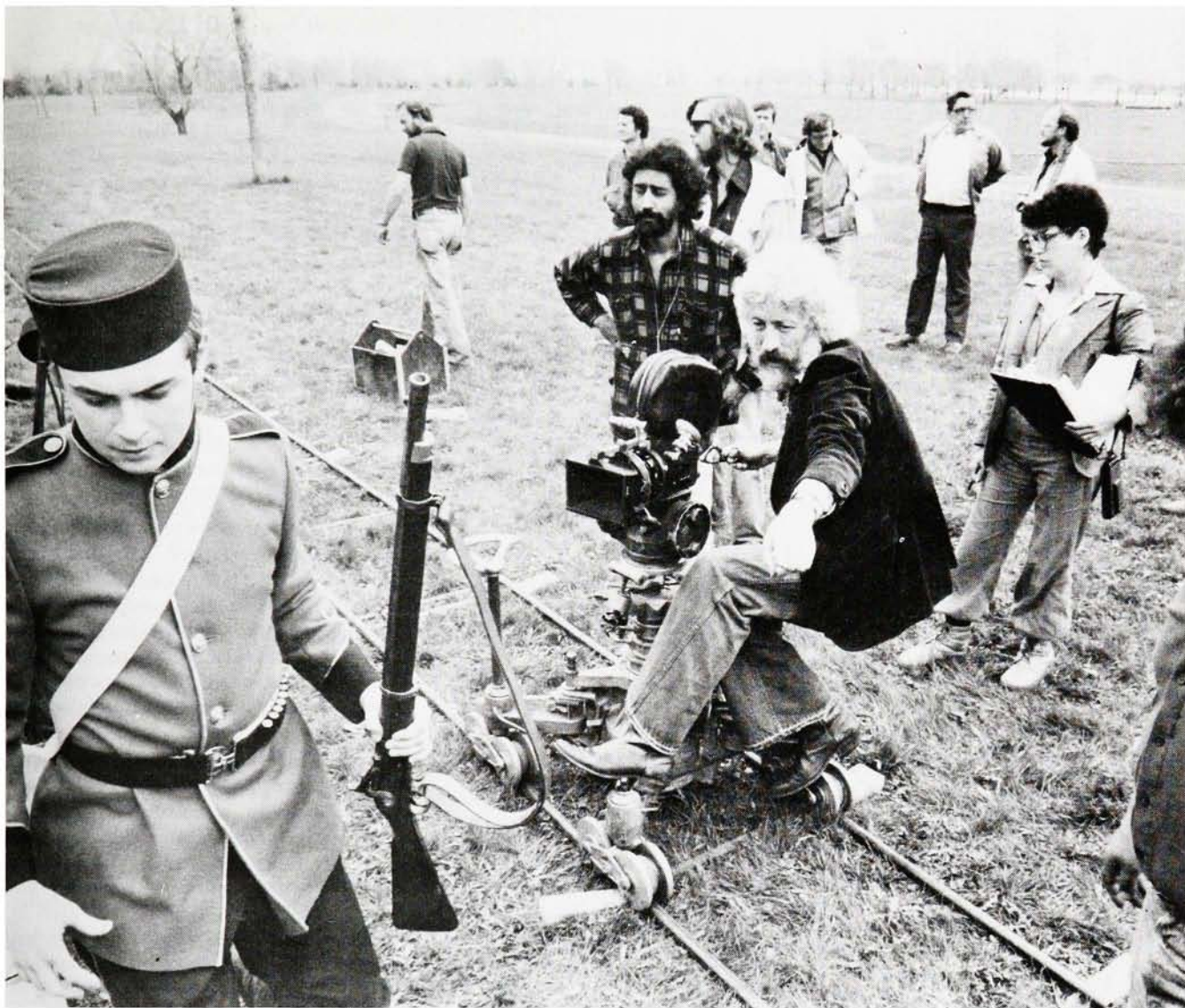
The argument serves Trent poorly, for after the Conquest of New France by the British in 1760 the Roman Catholic Church assumed responsibility for the survival of the French Fact in North America. Thus language rights, which have usually been bound up in the struggle for separate schools, are repeatedly at the heart of clashes between the secular and ecclesiastical authorities of Canada. Key aspects of the *Riel* affair, such as the above mentioned language provisions in the Manitoba Act of 1871, demonstrate the point nicely. Christopher Plummer, who portrays John A. Macdonald, apparently had a sense of the role linguistic variety could play in the film. He asked to do a couple of scenes in French with Jean-Louis Roux, who plays the role of Montreal's Bishop Ignace Bourget. The request was denied.

Except for the accents of the principal characters, the realizers of *Marie-Anne*, like those of *Riel*, fail to acknowledge that French was a major working language in the Canadian West during the era they seek to illuminate. The anomaly of Frenchmen speaking English among themselves is most evident in the scenes set in the quaint Lower Canadian community of Maskinongé, where Jean-Baptiste and Marie-Anne were married. Of course it is easy to criticize unimaginative approaches to the language question. It is much more difficult to suggest concrete ways that the real linguistic richness of our diverse cultural heritage can be cinematically conveyed. Clearly there is no simple answer to the problem of dramatizing historical events for unilingual audiences in which the interplay of languages forms a key component.

In order to achieve a degree of linguistic authenticity, the filmmakers considered here have seen fit to sacrifice some of the audience's grasp of what the Indians have to say. *Marie-Anne's* native people speak among themselves in their ancestral tongue, while apparently *Riel* has a few words of Cree here and there." That the French speakers are always translated while the Indians sometimes not, seems to imply a feeling that it is more important to understand white rather than native people.

I am not suggesting that the films display an overt malevolence against Indians. Both the makers of *Marie-Anne* and *Riel* cite sound reasons for portraying native people as they do. In *Riel* the Indian's central role in the North-West Rebellion of 1885 is not really explored. Big Bear and Poundmaker are given no parts because of the need to synthesize the story into manageable proportions. Similarly, the Indian community outside the gates of Fort Edmonton in *Marie-Anne* seems relatively small and weak. This is simply because the money was not available to hire more extras. While it is easy to sympathize with such considerations in isolation, their cumulative effect over the years has resulted in making the Indian seem more like an ornament than a prime mover of our history. We have forgotten how profoundly the colonial development of North America has been influenced by the native presence.

The Indians' strength was especially great during the era portrayed in *Marie-Anne* when fur was king. Correspondingly the power of the French and English traders was limited. The film, however, depicts the latter as the dominant group in the Canadian West. They could be more authentically characterized, I believe, as guests whose well-being was conditional upon their maintaining the Indians' good favor. Part of the



Producer John Trent (seated) on location for the *Riel* shoot

problem is the imposing nature of reconstructed Fort Edmonton, which suggests a misleading picture of the interracial balance that existed in 1808. The structure has been built to duplicate conditions circa 1845. By this time North Saskatchewan was a far different place than what it was when Marie-Anne first arrived.

By underplaying the Indians' involvement in the North-West Uprising of 1885, the makers of *Riel* similarly distort the historical events they describe. The Métis rebels that took up arms numbered less than 1,000, while there were 20,000 starving discontented Indians in the region who were beginning to discover the cruel meaning of the treaties they had recently signed. It was the latter group rather than the former which constituted the greatest threat to the civil authority and by their actions, both Riel and the Prime Minister eventually demonstrated that they recognized the fact.

In the CBC's drama we see none of this. While the Métis are at last given their say, the Indians are once again relegated to the periphery of the major events. Exactly how an accurate

image of the scale and complexity of historical Indian culture can be transferred to the screen at a realistic cost, remains an open question. Even the opening segment of *The Newcomers*, a well-funded hour devoted to the dramatic recreation of prehistorical West Coast society, hardly penetrates the most superficial level of the aboriginal psyche. Like the language issue, the Indian question awaits a truly innovative dramatic handling by a Canadian filmmaker.

But, in spite of their misrepresentations *Riel* and *Marie-Anne* still present a much truer image of the country's past than *Hollywood's Canada*. A new kind of Western is being created from stuff that has perhaps even greater mythic power than the uniform expansion of the frontier in the United States. Among the principal movers behind this trend are Fil Fraser and John Trent, whose most recent productions will hopefully someday be regarded as seminal films of an internationally recognized genre. And now that we are really taking seriously the challenge of cinematically interpreting Canada's history for ourselves and the world, we must work harder to get it right. □