

moore is better

by Paul Kelman



A triumphant Brian Moore.

Producing a workable 'Riel' script for the CBC was a major coup, and for Brian Moore, it was a major step ahead. Moore is not alone in his belief that once Canadian writers are paid a proper fee, they will produce scripts which compete in the world market.

Riel is the single most expensive and ambitious film ever to be produced by the CBC. The man who wrote it is Roy Moore: "When you're hot on an idea, you're living it. I lived inside Riel for a year".

The Riel project was a couple of years old before the CBC approached Moore. "They'd had a couple of writers, producers, researchers and hadn't been able to come up with a film of the Riel story. They saw a historical script I'd written about the Indian Marathon runner Tom Longboat and they came to me with the project."

He was asked to write a dramatic piece based on the Riel Rebellion. It is not a parochial view. "I've written for as broad a market as possible. Although it's there, I haven't written from a nationalistic point of view: after all it was a very important even in this country." As the writing progressed, Moore started to realize the immensity of the story. "They were looking for an epic. They got it." Moore explains he has written a psychological western. "To me, Riel was an infinitely complex and fascinating character. He was an educated man who had moved in political circles in Quebec. He dealt with a code and a system of laws. He knew and understood the East. What Dumont (Riel's general) did was supply Riel with the knowledge of the hunt. MacDonald had a dream, Riel had a dream. Nobody was the villain. It's very layered."

To keep the story straight, Moore's story editor was the film's executive producer Stan Colbert. Moore had known Colbert previously, when Colbert first came to Canada from the U.S. to work with screenwriters before he became Executive Producer of film drama at CBC. "I'd forced myself on Colbert three years ago. I was finding it difficult to get past a certain point here and I wanted to work with somebody who could really teach me a lot." Moore was offered Colbert's beach house at 461 Ocean Blvd. in Florida and he worked with Colbert for three months, writing for 20th Century Fox on a 90-minute drama for ABC. The show received two Emmy nominations. Prior to this Moore had written his first screenplay *Black Christmas* which became an important Canadian box-office grosser. "It was my first writing. It was written as an exploitation piece, for its commercial value, which is the best way to break into the business from my point of view."



Don Harron (right) as Donald Smith, receiving direction from George Bloomfield.

Other screenwriters in the country were having commercial success as well. David Cronenberg wrote and directed his horror thriller *Rabid* which hit the charts of *Variety*. Another colleague of Moore's is John Saxton who also writes for the *Great Detective* series. "John's written some of the *Ilsa* pictures; actually he's done the *Ilsa* picture, *Ilsa the She Wolf*".

To be a successful screenwriter, Moore feels, is to hit a large market. It's the nature of the medium. "I do think, however, there are ways to do it without sacrificing your own feelings about what you want to say. At this point I have that freedom. It's frightening."

Moore, who's been writing for six years now, is reported to have received a \$100,000 fee for writing *Riel*. "I wanted to put the figure out. Writers should know what their material is worth." When asked whether he was the highest paid screenwriter in Canada he replied, "I don't know. I don't know how much anybody else gets." He keeps himself isolated, explaining it's "unusual to meet with other writers to find an interchange of ideas and information." Success to Moore is personal. "I don't think I'm successful; it's an internal thing. I've always lived comfortably so that is not the issue. I have to satisfy myself then I can feel successful."

Is there a pull to Hollywood? "I know after *Black Christmas* I could have gone down to Hollywood. I had several people talk to me about it. But it wouldn't have been on

terms that I'd feel good about. At this point I can't see going. There are things I still want to do here."

Moore is very optimistic about the climate of the industry in the country both from the work that's being done around him and his experience with CBC and *Riel*.

"The industry has gotten a lot better in the last while with films like *Outrageous*, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, *Why Shoot the Teacher*. We're really coming to have an industry that seems to be working." When writing *Riel*, he expected the CBC to pull back on the magnitude of the project. "I was continually reassured that the scale in which I was seeing the picture was fine. I was impressed with their ability to go as far as they've gone. It's an enormous cast by any standards. They don't want to scrimp on this one. There's too much invested."

He is also pleased the actual production. "I think George Bloomfield is a very good director, very imaginative and John Trent is an excellent producer. I've been out on the *Riel* set a couple of times. It looks great. I was out there for the repulsion of McDougal, where there are a lot of Métis and they're turning back the man who's to be Governor. It looked very impressive. From what I've seen I think they have every chance of getting what they want. I think Bill Beeton (art director) is a genius. He's created a system for shooting this picture that's brilliant."

He's not always been satisfied however with the interpretation of his scripts: for example, **Black Christmas**. "In my version of the script you understood who the killer was, where he was coming from, why he was doing what he was doing. It made sense even though you never saw him. Bob Clark, the director, went for very obvious motives in the script, ending up by making the phone calls dirty. I was surprised. It had lost a whole sense of the story, the story behind the names of Billy and Agnes who the killer refers to in the phone calls. In the movie you didn't know who these people were. It made me angry."

Ultimately, what Moore finds frustrating about screenwriting is that he doesn't get to follow through into production. "Screenwriting is a very creative act but it only goes to a certain extent and then somebody else takes over. Then it's their creation: the producer, the director, the editor, the actors. Essentially what you're supplying is a blue print."

Moore is skeptical of the prevailing Hollywood view of the scenarist as the medium of the producer's message. He feels high salaries are offered screen artists partly in return for suppressing their creativity. "It's not the writer's picture. It's the producer's picture. I think I'm passing through screenwriting; what I want to do is to produce. I think producing is a very creative way to live. I see myself primarily as an entrepreneur. I think some of my writing is entrepreneurial."

Moore writes very visually, partly due to his background. His grandfather, who was a fine architect, built some "important buildings" and tuned Moore into visual aesthetics at an early age. "I can see the scenes I write. Ultimately I want to be able to feel the scenes not just visualize them. I cry sometimes if a scene is sad. When writing **Black Christmas** there were moments when a floorboard creaked and I was terrified."

Moore feels he's learned mostly by going to movies. "I don't know lenses, but I know what can be done. A writer has to know what his options are, his story telling tools."

When at work, writing is an obsession for Moore. "Sometimes I have six different characters rolling around in my head. It's an energizing process but it's also ultimately draining. Sometimes I write for an actor whose talent I can visualize. You can write for James Dean, if you want. I'll do anything to get it out of me. It's hard for me to write, very hard. I don't know if I can conceive of something that would be harder for me to do."

One of the reasons he started writing was the demand, the premise being there are lots of stars but not very many screenwriters. "People go to see stories, not so much a star. **Rocky** would have been a hit no matter who played it. DeNiro couldn't save Bertolucci's **1900** and De Niro is America's hottest actor. Audience market are part of the design of the parameter. The true test of a film, particularly a Canadian movie, is whether it does well here."

Although it has been months since he finished **Riel**, "and probably another nine months before I see it", he sees the project as an important part of CBC's history and is feeling good about his involvement. He also feels a responsibility to his country. "We have to create heroes here that will become part of the Canadian consciousness. It's in a very bad state. We need to excite people with where we come from and who we are. In that sense I'm a nationalist."

He sums up the **Riel** production explaining "What we have here is an incredible talent pool made up of people who have been making film for decades. **Riel** is acting as a focus for these people because it's so big and there's so much happening. It's a synergistic thing. They're out there making a movie. It's exciting. My job is done". □



The Canadian troops at the Battle of ~~Duke~~ Lake.

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