

# FILM REVIEWS

## George Bloomfield's **Riel**

d. George Bloomfield, sc. Roy Moore, ph. Vic Sarin sp. ph. effects Doug Wardle ed. Myrtle Virgo neg. cutting Rose Wyatt sd. Gerald King sd. ed. Lock Johnston, Kevin Townshend sd. re-rec. Len Abbott set dec. Bill Beeton, m. William Macaulay, cost. Margaret Laurent, make up Pat Harshaw, l.p. Raymond Cloutier, Christopher Plummer, Roger Blay, William Shatner, Arthur Hill, Leslie Nielson, Don Harron, Barry Morse, Lloyd Bochner, Paxton Whitehead, John Neville, Jean-Louis Roux, Marcel Sabourin, Don Francks, August Schellenberg, Brenda Donohue, Gary Reineke, Kenneth Welsh, Chris Wiggins, Claude Jutra, exec. p. Stanley Colbert, p. John Trent p.c. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in association with Green River Pictures (1978) col 16mm running time 142 minutes, 52 seconds and 19 frames.

As the Canadian film industry leaps with joyous tax dollars into the dull maw of the US B-movie drive-in market, obediently following American directions and the British example and freeing Californian producers to work on more prestigious films, our television industry and the CBC in particular are being left with the responsibility of forging serious entertainment from the Canadian experience. The BBC's example shows that this is not necessarily the tragedy some TV critics would think it to be. The BBC has brought more prestige and honor to Britain than its film industry ever did. But this shift does force film critics to consider television with new seriousness.

It would have been hard to ignore CBC's two part movie **Riel**. Thanks to CBC's refreshing commitment to a major promotional campaign, the name Riel was everywhere. From the National News downwards, **Riel** was sold as Canada's answer to **Roots**, **Lawrence of Arabia** and **Joan of Arc** rolled into one: our very own myth to stir the blood and sell T-shirts by.

With consistent intelligence, **Riel** has taken a rather murky figure from our past and made dramatic sense from the shadows. For the first time Canadians have become involved in the ma-



Raymond Cloutier's gripping portrayal of Louis Riel brings authentic realism to film

chinery of modern myth making and, for this, **Riel** is well worth the \$2.2 million it cost. The film is a brave and important step for the CBC. Yet as a piece of drama that has chosen to stand against the best of American television, the imported BBC series and the many Hollywood Westerns it brings to mind, **Riel** must stand as a film as well as a cultural event.

For years the CBC has worked almost exclusively within the field of social realism inherited from Europe. Programs such as *For the Record* are born from a romantic positivism, seeing reality as a skein of observable facts to be rearranged both to heal national ills and to entertain. Success was dependent on the passion of the

writing. Success was rare. Not that many Canadians noticed, because we were busy watching American television and movies, where action is used to transcend reality and the producer's ability to mythologize the American experience is all that matters. With Roy Moore's inventive script, producers Stan Colbert and John Trent set out to create a **Riel** within this myth making tradition. Unfortunately, the director George Bloomfield didn't or couldn't.

Myth making takes passion and Bloomfield's direction lacks it. The film feels cramped, busy with details but hollow emotionally. Bloomfield risks so little that we are unable to empathize with the bravery of Riel's actions. Despite fine performances the film does not reach out to grab us until it is too late.

Our first view of **Riel** (Raymond Cloutier) is a classic Western opening. Riding home after years spent studying in Montreal, this lone horseman is the returning son now prepared to right ancient wrongs. Bloomfield chooses however to bleed all mythical power from the scene, hurrying, in mid-shot to get to a fussy bit of business as Riel robs a Metis cache. More perversely he never shows us the landscape Riel is so thankful to be returning to. The robbery is interrupted by enraged Metis led by Dumont (Roger Blay), and as Riel and a rider roll to the ground — first in anger and then in joyful recognition — the scene takes on the power of a rather dull gymkhana.

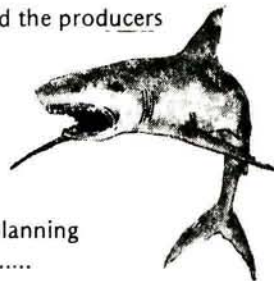
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Riel is back among friends, not a man apart shaped by some heroic quality but, like Dumont who looks on dystopically, as scruffy Everyman.

The half-hearted staging of a later symbolic arm-wrestling match between Riel and Dumont confirms Bloomfield's realistic approach. The written scene cries out for the physical intensity of a Scorsese or Cimino and instead is treated with restrained good taste and immediately slips from the memory. A lovely and moving scene in which Riel emerges from a night's religious vigil to tell waiting Metis of his decision to join their struggle and a single slow pan revealing Metis at last physically halting the aggrandizement of a racist settler (a fine performance by Gary Reineke) give us a glimpse of the emotional power there could have been.

Without visual grandeur the story has been reduced. With no strong sense of the land and life that drew the Metis to rebel, their fight becomes one of personalities. This same directorial restraint places more weight on the rather pedestrian dialogue than it can bear. The intelligence and drive that must have made the young Riel a man apart from his Metis friends becomes an accident of book-learning. The brute force and craft that made Dumont the leader of the hunt and, later, a skillful soldier becomes an ability to shoot down flying whisky bottles.

Without a firm sense of community or cause, much of *Riel* floats in a no-man's land, yet the very core of the story is the physical and emotional distance separating Riel from Macdonald's Ottawa. Without a heroic protagonist John A. becomes the stock Western politician, fraudulent and grasping, and Christopher Plummer, battling with the lines like a petulant John Wayne, is mostly as dull as that Prime Minister no doubt really was. Only in fine scenes with the fiercely political Bishop Bouget (Jean-Louis Roux) does Plummer's bland ruddiness and Roux's tight lipped pallor give the muted clashes of will sudden depth, and the film leaps alive with racial and religious tensions far

beyond the words.

Raymond Cloutier is not as lucky. Deprived of a setting in which to appear heroic, his sensitive acting becomes variations on too small a theme. Without space Riel is also without depth. We never believe in this man's God, for instead of being seen as a source of strength — a voice supporting him through the loneliness of leadership — faith is shown as some sort of fever to be used to explain away irrational, if historical, acts. Joan of Arc has become a hysterical legal clerk. We believe in Cloutier's Riel but are not moved by him. By the time we reach his powerful and moving final speech it is too late, and the trial and execution have the calming inevitability not of fate but of a historical essay being rounded out.

Well before these scenes, the early lack of emotional power has taken its toll. A rather silly scene where murderous Canadians chase the newly elected Manitoba M.P. Riel from Parliament and a later narrative confusion bring the first broadcast limping to a close: William Macaulay's music being required to suddenly make us believe in both the heroic and visionary Riel.

With the second broadcast, history has taken over and the bulk of the film is spent on the battles of Fish Creek, Duck River and Batoche. Except for the famed thin-red-line having shriveled to a rather emaciated clump, the production is excellent. But it provokes a rather abstract excitement for, without a strong dramatic drive, the battles lack definition and blend into each other in pleasant chaos. As Dumont and Riel creep ignominiously from their last defeat, I was left dreaming unpatriotically of Ford, Peckinpah and even Peter Watkins.

While I wish that somehow the bravery that went into getting this film made and promoted had also carried over into the film itself, *Riel* is an important success. Television, as Colbert has said, "is a producer's art," and with Trent he has proved it can be done — this facing the colonization of our imagination with myths of our own. *Riel* is just the beginning.

Alastair Brown

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