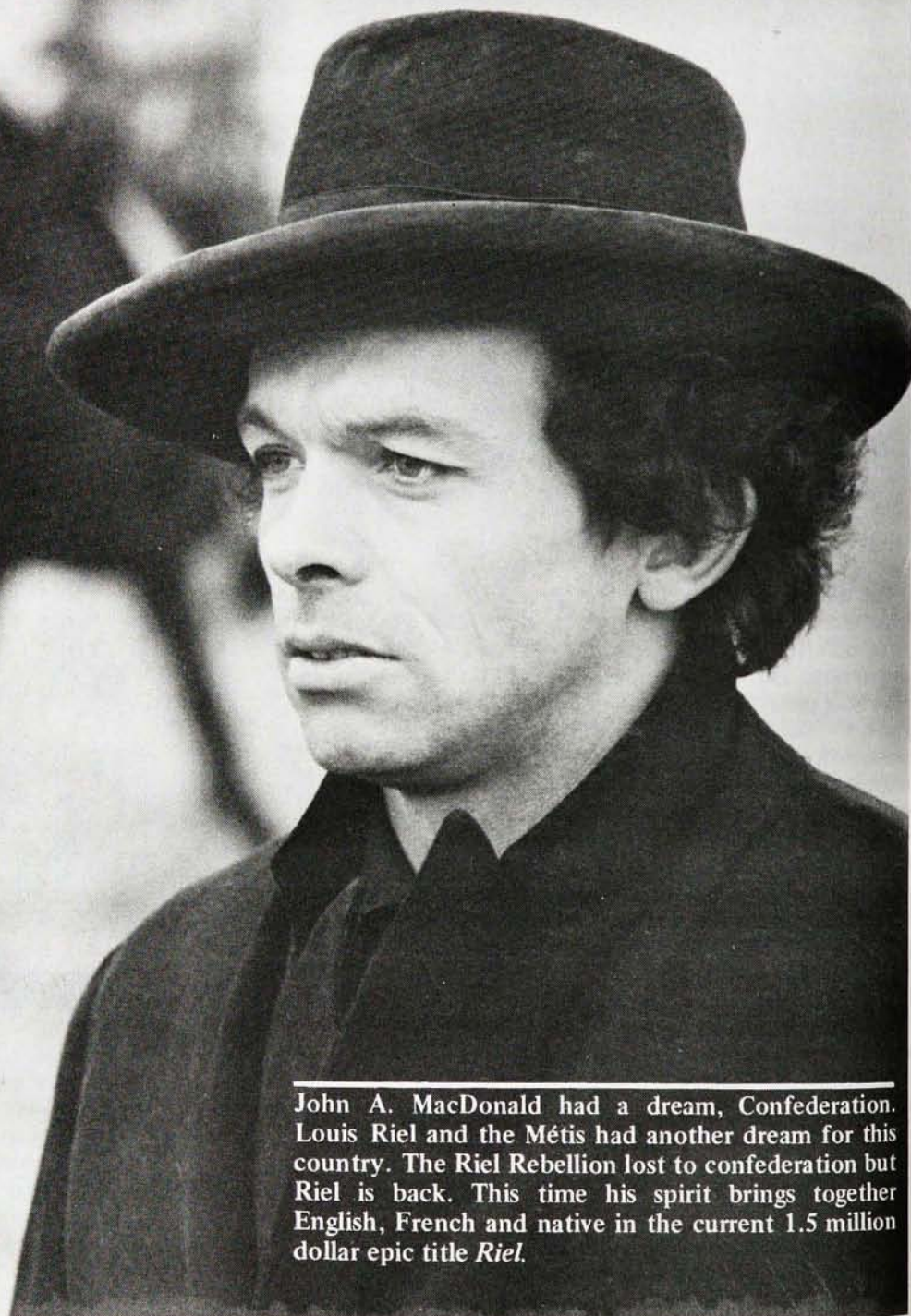


on location with the rebels

by Paul Kelman



John A. MacDonald had a dream, Confederation. Louis Riel and the Métis had another dream for this country. The Riel Rebellion lost to confederation but Riel is back. This time his spirit brings together English, French and native in the current 1.5 million dollar epic title *Riel*.

Veteran Québécois actor Raymond Cloutier as Riel

"The spirit of Riel is alive with us today"

— Raymond Cloutier who plays Riel.

Riel has been a CBC dream for two years now and, from all appearances, it's a dream come true. Being on location at Kleinburg studios is like walking into the past.

On the hill ahead, English troops in red, brown and green tunics, on horseback and on foot, escort a wagon with cannon trailing behind. To their right, hidden in the creek below, sit General Dumont and a band of Métis with flintlocks ready to ambush. Shots ring out and horses rear as troops prepare defense. The battle of Fish Creek ensues. It is April 25, 1885.

Later, a few hundred yards away, in an Indian village, Dumont, Riel and Major Crozier of the North-West Mounted Police meet to discuss their problems. There are many horses, many guns, many Indians and many troops. The tension of imminent battle hangs over the smoke filled village.

Going back along the mud thickened path towards the studios there is a complete western town with wooden sidewalks, saloon, jailhouse, stable and a broken wagon in the middle of the main street. On the other side of the studios stands a stone fort with houses and cannons.



A feisty Brenda Donahue threatens Riel (Raymond Cloutier).

This is the Riel set. The production boasts a cast of over 500 headed by a star-studded line up which includes Raymond Cloutier, Roger Blays, Marcel Sabourin, Claude Jutra, Jean-Louis Roux, Christopher Plummer, Leslie Neilson, Lloyd Bochner, Barry Morse, Ken Welsh, Paxton Whitehead, Don Harron, August Schellenbert, Ken James, Gary Reineke and Brenda Donahue.

The screenplay written by Roy Moore (of *Black Christmas* fame) is a psychological drama and action adventure story. The setting and whole feeling of the production is very realistic.

For Vic Sarin, director of photography, the visual historic value is of paramount importance. He goes for "the look they had in those days, the costumes and the visual feel of the times." On staff with CBC since 1966, thirty-six year old



Dumont (Roger Blay) as the rebel general.

Sarin draws from his award-winning documentary background to bring the realism to the picture. His biggest problems at present are the weather and the horses. So far the horses have thrown Lloyd Bochner to the ground and kicked Roger Roger Blays in the forehead. "The horses are not trained for Sarin sighs.

He is, however, very impressed with the quality of actors and the prospect of what they can give the camera excites him. "Gary Reineke is an excellent actor and when you work with Morse he knows the lens, the light, the focus. Some actors have film quality. They come alive, like Raymond. "Sarin's energy is light but intense. "I live for film, that's all I do. It's love and pain". Sarin is hard at work in both.

The man who supplies the visual context for Sarin's camera is the art director Bill Beeton. His research for the film took him through archives and to the historic sites of the battles. The result is an elaborate and complex design whose flexibility allows for different parts of sets to be put together in various combinations to create whole other settings. He is happy with the result feeling that between the original "vision and the result, it's pretty close". "It's fun", he says. "I'm very old playing like a kid".

In the planning stages while sketching the key visuals or 'hooks', it was "like drawing a comic book. It's a maple-syrup-western as opposed to spaghetti," he jokes. There are twenty years of CBC experience behind the expertise of the closely planned shots Beeton has provided. "All the shots were boarded and planned ahead of time. The details were very complicated." In the action scenes, that can mean visuals for three cameras at once.

Paul Kelman is an actor/director who has worked at the Passe Muraille Theatre in Toronto for the past three years.



Thomas Scott (Gary Reineke) being dragged to his execution by the Métis.

In the Battle of Batoche, the action includes ground explosions, gun fire, men being shot both on foot and off horses and cannon fire. The special effects are the responsibility of Doug Wardle, a one time Eaton's display man and now twenty-year CBC veteran. "We started preplanning in January, finding guns and equipment. We got 250 guns dating around 1885 and 15 Winchesters. The rest are twelve-gauge-shotguns converted to look like flintlocks. We couldn't get a gattling gun in Canada so we had to go to the U.S." Three cannons were built by CBC for Riel and adapted to black powder chamber. Even the blood and blanks are specially made for the film. The animals are also part of the effects, from the twenty-five horses right down to the mouse. There is a scene where a mouse skips across a rifle in the line of fire disrupting the aim. "The mouse died before the shot, but we had a stand in for him." Much of Wardle's job is the handcrafted detail of putting bullet heads in the side boards of wagons that will detonate electrically with rotary switches or making the personal battery packs that set off pressured blood pouches hidden on the actor who is being shot at. "It's a very exciting job. I always say one thing, I've never been bored."

At the time of this writing the filming is half done with another month to go. The spirit on the set is still surprisingly high and there is an air of excitement and importance about what everybody is doing.

Roger Blays (Dumont) explains "the other night the Indians were at dinner singing songs and I started singing with them and they accepted it. It was good. I have to feel all this because Dumont was this man." He elaborates on the necessity "to form a family", how "everything is important, the weather, even the smell".

Born in Quebec, with 20 years in the theatre, he did not speak English until age 24. A Québécois, he feels "everything is politic". The shooting day over, a bearded Gabriel Dumont in buckskin and leggings hikes across the windy fields talking of contemporary politics. When he arrives at the studio he is taken back with the sight of a silver limosine equipped with color television ready to take him the 45 minute ride home. Dumont crouches warily and stalks the car fingering the chrome and peering inside the windows, a child of the past experiencing the 20th century. "This is for me?" he says. Everything is politic.

Like Blays, George Bloomfield, the director of *Riel*, is totally immersed in the film. Even his shooting schedule is rolled up in a piece of buckskin tied by leather thongs. He is no stranger to the material, having spent six weeks living with the Métis in Kenora. "I've done as much research, read as much as I could get my hands on". He agrees there is an "opening up" feeling on the set. Although his job demands foresight and overview, he is a very present tense person. "Right now this is the most important thing I've ever done."



The Métis, led by Dumont, come to threaten the Schultz homestead

For Bloomfield this production is more than a film. "At this particular time in the history of this country, any Canadian who has star value has been responsive to this project. It's part of the spirit, bringing them back for an event." He speaks highly of the talent in this country feeling it is as good as anybody has anywhere. "You can't find anyone better than Brenda Donahue in the States no matter where you look." Bloomfield should know. He has directed Alan Alda, Dyan Cannon, Ann Jackson and Eli Wallach in other films.

Although Bloomfield is very critical of how the CBC negates the development of a star system and how the production has been given only "peanuts" in comparison with major works in other countries, he is effervescently optimistic about the film as a step in the right direction. "CBC is going more and more Hollywood. There's no question. It's about goddamn time we got into Showbiz."

Much of the impetus in this direction is due to producer John Trent. Says Bloomfield, "My first impression of John is him sitting at this enormous map with tin soldiers on it, choreographing the battles. His energy is absolutely inspiring. I was most impressed with his enthusiasm and the preparation. He's so supportive; he understands because he's a director himself."

"I know what a director needs," echoes Trent. Trent's company Green River Pictures is, along with CBC, the co-producer of *Riel*. "It's world distribution we're after," he offers. The way he sees it, "the world has picked up on Ameri-

can history and Canada has been no different. This may set the record straight. *Riel* is expressing the Canadian view of our own history. Our role is to leave a view of how we saw a time and a place. It's a reflection. I have a great love for Canada. The story of *Riel* is important to express so people have a grasp of what happened. We always get accused of being boringly Canadian or trying to copy the Americans. These are the two barbs of the spear that are always stabbing us. Why shouldn't the world be interested in our view?"

The production of *Riel* is a mix of four major cultures, the English, the French, the Métis and the Americans. Trent has produced, directed and written for American companies like ABC, NBC and MGM. How does it compare with this country? "In the U.S. it's usually been done before; when you do it here, it's the first time. What we're doing is making a very entertaining three hours of television with residual value in as much as it reflects our history".

This is a CBC first. Its the biggest single production the Corporation has undertaken. It's courageous of it to take the risk. In this production there's a focus, a sense of purpose, a sense of achievement. This is the art of the possible," he concludes.

Trent has striven not only for an entertaining view of history but a balanced one. He explains, "The lack of knowledge is that we look at the rebellion as if *Riel* was a crazy lunatic, whereas he has a point. Look at his summation speech; he's very eloquent. The man had a vision." So did the CBC. So far, it's looking good. □