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Book Review: Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography - Representing Canadian History through Graphic Art

Brock J. Vaughan

Wilfrid Laurier University, vaug0290@mylaurier.ca

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Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography

Chester Brown

Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2003

271 pp.

Book Review: *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*
Representing Canadian History through Graphic Art

Often overlooked and underappreciated, graphic novels serve as an alternative form of representing historical narratives. Through visual representations of historical events, Chester Brown's *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography* aids our understanding of a highly controversial figure in Canadian history. Riel challenges racial purity and conventional Euro-Canadian norms, blurred boundaries of nation and state and forever changed the political landscape of Canada as it is known today. Yet, Brown's portrayal of Riel is far from heroic and close examination of his work exposes Riel's many flaws and shortcomings. In the book, Riel has trouble making decisions when put under pressure, especially during periods of armed conflict. Riel also struggles to work effectively with Métis leader Gabriel Dumont. Examining Riel's conflicted relationship with Dumont, during the series of events before his hanging for high treason in 1885, serves as a way of uncovering Riel's character as represented by Brown. Upon viewing Brown's illustrations, readers are able to grasp Riel's depicted personality with relative ease. Brown's sequential art narrative brings Riel's story to life for the average reader. By portraying Riel as a relatable human being who is both self-assured and insecure, Brown accomplishes a feat that other mediums and works of literature simply cannot do as effectively. Thus, Brown's comic-strip biography reveals how images in graphic novels can uniquely represent historical events and engage readers in historical narratives.

For the purposes of this paper, the 'average' reader will simply be defined as an individual who does not possess advanced knowledge of Riel's legacy or the surrounding history. This average reader could include high school students, university undergraduates and adults who may have limited historical knowledge of Riel's life story. For some, comics may be easier to read than books. For others, this may not necessarily hold true. Graphic novels are "neither easier nor harder" to comprehend in comparison to traditional text-based stories (King 2012, 190). Rather, graphic novels require different ways of thinking. Therefore, historical narratives represented in graphic form have the potential to influence readers' understanding of past events in ways other novels cannot. By selecting specific moments from Riel's life and depicting heightened scenes of drama through his illustrations, Brown involves readers in the imaginative process. His illustrations shed new light on an important topic in Canadian history. Unfortunately, many teachers overlook graphic novels as an effective means of storytelling, often viewing the textbook as the only way to communicate history (King 2012, 212). Yet, choosing a graphic novel may likely be "less intimidating for students" and, consequently, may make complex historical narratives easier to grasp (King 2012, 212). In just three consecutive panels, the reader is able to grasp what may have taken an author three paragraphs to explain.

Upon viewing the simple six-panel layout in Brown's novel, one may assume that the comic-strip form follows a chronological and linear narrative, similar to a textbook. However, this is not the case. Readers have visual choices to make that may alter their perceptions of the

events being portrayed. King (2012) argues that the comic-strip form is non-linear, and actually transcends space and time because the reader is required “to read all the narrative lines and juxtaposed images simultaneously” (208). As McCloud (1993) notes, readers are forced to close the gaps between panels, forming a version of the plot that is unique to oneself. One such instance occurs near the beginning of the novel, when Riel meets Dumont for the first time. An assistant informs Riel that Dumont wishes to speak with him. Riel exclaims, “Okay – give me a moment” (Brown 2003, 78). The next panel features Riel standing beside his desk as he puts on his suit jacket. In the next frame, Riel and Dumont are shaking hands. How much time has just passed? How long was this ‘moment’? It is entirely up for interpretation. Did Riel step outside of his office to greet Dumont, or did he allow Dumont to walk through the doorway first? Did Riel need that small amount of time to finish the work he was doing, or was he mentally preparing himself for the greeting? Depending how the scene is interpreted, one can either view Dumont as active or passive, and Riel as poised or apprehensive. Therefore, it is apparent that small, relatively trivial and mundane scenes such as this can have extreme significance because it sets the tone of their relationship going forward.

Throughout the novel, it becomes apparent that Riel and Dumont have a discordant relationship. Riel and Dumont struggle to maintain similar viewpoints regarding strategic initiatives, often disagreeing with one another on appropriate military tactics. Both men also begin to question each other’s thought patterns. For instance, Riel does not approve of Dumont’s savage “Indian tactics”, and Dumont grows wary of Riel’s infatuation with God (Brown 2003, 166). Questions begin to arise regarding Riel’s mental health in relation to whether Riel was being clever or foolish in his decision-making, which was heavily guided by his faith - although this can be difficult to tell. Nonetheless, how Brown depicts these moments is crucial to understanding Riel’s relationship with Dumont. For example, during battle, Riel sits back comfortably in the trench reciting religious passages, sharing his prophecies with Dumont. With a rifle aimed at his enemies, and clearly focused on the task at hand, Dumont acknowledges Riel’s religious outbursts by giving meek responses such as “[i]s that so?” and “[s]ounds good to me” (Brown 2003, 192). Dumont appears uninterested in Riel’s faith and, at times, begins to lose confidence in Riel’s ability to think rationally during intense situations.

Visually, Riel is depicted as an “intellectual leader”, often shown to be “reading and shuffling through paper” (Lesk 2010, 77). In contrast, Dumont is portrayed as a strong militant, providing “much of the brawn” (Lesk 2010, 77). Ironically, Brown’s imagery and dialogue are at odds. While Riel has a large, heroic presence visually in the novel, Dumont is shown to be a more effective leader through dialogue. There are many instances where Dumont is thinking more clearly than Riel, and these moments make Riel resemble an anti-heroic figure. Dumont is portrayed as a realist, one who is confident in his decision-making. Riel, however, is depicted as a naive visionary who, driven by his faith, fails to be an effective military strategist. After all, being incarcerated in an insane asylum and fleeing the country are certainly not the typical traits of a national hero. Even the novel’s cover insinuates that Riel is not heroic. He is shown standing on the edge of a cliff, eyes wide open, looking frightened, almost as if he is unsure as to what to do and where to go. He looks bewildered, dazed, and confused, thus making him appear anxious and uncertain. These qualities are definitely not what is imagined when one thinks of a heroic figure.

Another pivotal scene worth unpacking takes place after the battle, when Riel and Dumont find themselves alone at night. Riel asks Dumont how much longer they can last, to

which Dumont replies "...they're just waiting for us to run out of bullets" (Brown 2003, 193). As Lesk (2010) points out, "[i]t is the last time the two are shown together" (78). I argue that Brown's choice to represent this scene during nightfall is important because the black coloured background distinguishes the single panel, thus revealing its significance and foreshadowing a battle that will ultimately be lost. Afterwards, both Riel and Dumont retreat into the woods. When they meet up and converse with one another, they appear in separate frames. Lesk (2010) asserts that the division between both men becomes apparent; Riel and Dumont "...are not facing one another as they *cannot* do so: they are at odds" (Lesk 2010, 78). The physical and psychological separation of Riel and Dumont reveals two clashing visions of leadership. Would the Métis peoples have been better off following Dumont in their fight for self-determination and self-governance? This question will forever be embedded in the imagined community of Canada and will likely never be completely understood.

Perhaps Riel's biggest mistake was the ill-advised execution of Thomas Scott. Brown represents the significance of this crucial moment by showing Scott kneeling on the ground with his arms tied and blindfolded, his back against a brick wall. Here, Scott looks helpless, presenting an opportunity for the reader to experience sympathy for him. When Scott is shot, Brown leaves the panel blank, leaving this vital moment entirely to the reader's imagination. The next few panels show Scott lying on the ground, moaning and slowly dying. The second and fatal shot to the head is shown in all its glory, leaving nothing to the imagination. As King (2012) notes, sound is an important element in any story but especially so in graphic narratives. In a larger font size, the word "BLAM" represents the sound of the pistol that ended Scott's life (Brown 2003, 73). Earlier in the novel, Scott is depicted to be the sole killer of Norbert Parisien. Brown (2003), however, admitted in his notes that "...it's likely that the murder was more of a group effort" (248). Scott is shown to be a violent axe murderer, depicted as almost inhuman in both his appearance and actions. The "THK" sound of metal on flesh reinforces Brown's aggressive portrayal of Scott (Brown 2003, 55; Lander 2005, 119). Scott serves "as a symbol of the violence, racism, and rough masculinity that characterized Western Canada at the time" (Lander 2005, 119). Brown does not shy away from this hostile representation. In doing so, readers may debate whether Riel's execution of Scott was indeed justified. Key moments such as these demonstrate the importance of the artist's role in shaping graphic narratives for readers.

By telling stories in unique ways, graphic artists have immense power over how these stories are told. As Lander (2005) mentions, Brown does not hide from the fact that Riel is his creation, shaped by his own understanding of the historical events. Unlike historians and other academic authors, graphic artists can "get away" with creative decisions (Lander 2005, 120). I argue that this provides readers with an endless supply of possible interpretations in which to form their own conclusions, thus resulting in greater insight and critical thought. McCloud (1993) emphasizes that emotional connections to storylines through comics give readers the opportunity to embody themselves in the characters, a concept he calls "masking" (43). When reading Brown's novel, one cannot help but fully immerse themselves into the life of Riel. Due to the simplicity of Brown's drawings, readers are better able to grasp important concepts. However, "a simple style doesn't necessitate simple story" (McCloud 1993, 45). As a result of the style of writing, Brown's historical account leaves gaps and is condensed down to its essential elements. Nevertheless, the storyline is very complex and multifaceted, providing the reading with details about the described historical events. Each panel conveys far more information than text alone can provide. For example, when Riel hikes to the top of a mountain

just outside of Washington, D.C., he has a religious experience that would likely be hard to describe in words. Brown's illustrations show Riel floating up into the sky as God transports him to the "fourth heaven to explain the nations of the Earth", designating him as the "prophet of the new world" (Brown 2003, 107). The reader can clearly see that Riel is having an out-of-body experience as he drifts past planets in outer space. This prominent scene embodies a key concept in the book: Riel's religious and spiritual awakening.

The final scene in the novel, in which Brown has complete control over how it is represented, is perhaps the most powerful of all. Riel is shown with a sack over his head and a rope tied around his neck. Riel exclaims "Courage Father" before the hatch opens beneath his feet (Brown 2003, 238). What is most interesting about Riel's final moments is that Brown does not only leave the final panel blank, he leaves it out entirely. There is not even a border around the last square. There are only five panels on the last page, a format he breaks only once. The reader knows that Riel's body will be hanging limp, yet Brown chooses not to show this. Riel's death is almost unspeakable, something Brown may have not wanted to illustrate. In contrast to Brown's portrayal of Riel being an anti-heroic figure throughout the novel, this final scene proves to be indeed very heroic. Riel died tragically, yes, but demonstrated immense bravery to go out the way he did. At no point did Riel 'lose his cool'. He attempted to reassure the people close to him that God had greater plans and everything would be fine. In reality, however, things were not fine. After his execution, the Métis people of Manitoba and Saskatchewan were dealt a heavy blow, falling on tough times socially, culturally, economically, and politically. Still, Riel's efforts brought issues of Métis sovereignty, Aboriginal rights, and Francophone-Anglophone relations to the forefront of the Canadian imagination.

As this paper has demonstrated, graphic novels serve as an alternative form of representing historical narratives. Brown's *Louis Riel* is one example of how an artist can effectively communicate a variety of messages to readers through graphic novels. Brown's work shows us just how unique and distinctive comics can be at representing information, whilst revealing the complexities graphic art holds underneath the basic pen strokes. Riel's conflicted relationship with Dumont in the novel aids our understanding of Riel's legacy in ways other works of literature simply cannot provide. Riel's story is one of binaries, there is no single story to be told. Depending how one interprets Brown's novel, Riel was either a confident heroic figure, or an unstable troubled man; perhaps he was both. Nevertheless, Brown is able to make Riel a relatable character, which ultimately increases readers' critical engagement with historical narratives. Riel has many historical imaginings, among those being "traitor of English Canada, French-Canadian religious acolyte, Métis saviour, spiritual shaman, educated leader, Father of Confederation, [and] crazy fool" (Lesk 2010, 65). Yet, in closing, it is important to note that "biography isn't the person", it is "a representation of the person" (Wright 2016, 14). As such, "[b]iographical truth is never final and always contested" (Wright 2016, 14). Although this is true, "narrative truth may be the best we'll get" (Porterfield 2000, 180). Riel's legacy, albeit highly contested, will undoubtedly live on for centuries to come. Similarly, Brown's *Louis Riel* will continue to provoke insightful discussions on an important topic in Canadian history. Therefore, we should not underestimate the potential of graphic art at successfully representing the imagined communities of our nation.

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