

LAWRENCE CLARKE: ARCHITECT OF REVOLT

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ABSTRACT/RESUME

This paper is a study of Lawrence Clarke, the Hudson's Bay Company's Chief Factor at Fort Carleton, and his role in the Metis uprising in 1685. During that period Clarke served both the Metis and the Dominion Government, in capacities both official and unofficial.

La personnalité de Lawrence Clarke, agent en chef de la Compagnie de la baie d'Hudson au fort Carleton, et son rôle dans le soulèvement des Métis en 1685, sont les sujets de la présente étude. Au cours de cet épisode, Clarke a servi à la fois les Métis et le gouvernement canadien, à titre officiel et non officiel.

When people resort to warfare as a solution to their problems it is usually the culmination of a conflict that has been fought in the political arena. Such was the case in Canada's North-West in 1885. After almost fifteen years of struggle with the Canadian government over title to lands occupied by the Metis, a series of battles were fought and the Metis were eventually defeated in the Battle of Batoche. Before choosing war as the method of settling a dispute, a people - or a nation - often faces a moment which makes them feel that no other option is viable. This moment came on March 18, 1885 for the Metis of Batoche and environs. The 'straw that broke the camel's back' was a statement by Lawrence Clarke, the Hudson's Bay Company Chief Factor at Fort Carlton (Anonymous, 1935:4S; Stanley, 1936:443, n. 69). At a meeting with Gabriel Dumont and other Metis representatives he passed on a message that resulted in the formation of a Metis Provisional Government. The Metis asked what plans the Government had formulated to redress their grievances and Clarke's answer was, "... that the answer was on the way, in the form of SOO Mounted Police who would suppress the whole hail-breed agitation" (Stanley, 1963: 305).

A study of the man who delivered this statement and the importance of the statement will be addressed in this paper. Lawrence Clarke was aware of the repercussions when he delivered the statement. He deliberately provoked the Metis into acting in what appeared at the time to be a warlike manner. This was possible because of his status in the eyes of the Metis. An historian has interpreted the reaction to the statement as a situation where, "... the credulous Metis believed the worst and hurried to tell Riel" (ibid). The Metis faith in the words of one individual merits close examination. Were the Metis over-reacting because of their 'credulous' nature, or was their reaction based on a faith and trust in Lawrence Clarke? The answers are to be found in a study of Lawrence Clarke and his 'official' and 'unofficial' roles in the lives of the Metis.

A relationship involving trust and/or respect between people is one that evolves over time. This is true of the relationship between Clarke and the Metis. An early reference to Clarke comes from Father Grandin in 1870. He recognized Clarke's efforts as a service to the church but expressed some doubts as to Clarke's motives.¹ This early observation brings into focus the dual nature of Clarke's roles in public and behind the scenes. In 1873, a group of Metis mentioned Clarke in a petition as a man who had "... fine words and flatteries to tell the Indians, in order to better deceive them afterwards."² These observations cast some doubt over Clarke's credibility but do not provide an example of this dual role playing. This example is to be found in the roles played by Clarke at the meeting where the people of St. Laurent decided to establish themselves as a permanent settlement on the Saskatchewan River.

The Metis asked Clarke to serve as chairman of the December 31, 1871 meeting in which St. Laurent was founded.³ After expressing support for the Metis and recognizing their concerns over land title in the community, Clarke wrote to the Lieutenant Governor of the North West Territories asking him to investigate claims and grant title to the St. Laurent Metis.⁴ This was the official Clarke as he was known to the Metis. What they did not know was that Clarke

had devised a plan for using the Metis as a source of cheap labour for the Hudson's Bay Company.⁵ This was the unofficial Clarke. In 1875 the North West Mounted Police found evidence that Clarke had engineered a confrontation between Metis society and a westwardly expanding Canadian society.⁶ This unofficial role played by Clarke was unknown to the Metis. This would explain why the Metis provided Clarke with almost total support during his successful campaign to become the first elected member to the North West Territories Council.⁷ During the next years Clarke was actively involved in the petitioning campaign for land title conducted by the Metis and non-native settlers in and around Prince Albert.⁸ This campaigning on behalf of the Metis created an Jr'rage for Clarke as a supporter of the Metis cause for title to their land. Another factor that enhanced this official role was Clarke's role as an employer of the Metis in the carting and trade industry controlled by the Hudson's Bay Company. Clearly the Metis and Lawrence Clarke were well known to each other prior to the statement of March 18, 1885. The Metis based their feelings of respect for Clarke on his stature in business, politics and society. This respect for Clarke was based on the official role played by Clarke and not on the unofficial role. This latter role was unknown to the Metis.

The Metis decision to invite Louis Riel to return to Canada and assist in organizing their land struggle brought about an increase in the duality of Lawrence Clarke's roles. On May 14, 1884. Clarke made the first of a series of reports on events in the North West. In a telegraphed report to Lieutenant Governor Dewdney, Clarke stated that:

A series of meetings have been held at which only half-breeds were allowed to be present, all were sworn to secrecy as to what transpired. Result everything divulged. Object was to pass resolutions complaining of their treatment by Government. Grievances imaginary such as having to pay for entering homesteads. [?] delegates appointed interview Riel asking him visit them.⁹

This telegram reveals a few things about Clarke and his roles with the Metis. He was obviously in possession of inside information. What is most revealing is that he felt that the Metis grievances were imaginary. This is a statement from a man involved in over ten years of petitioning for the Metis. If the grievances were imaginary, then Clarke was aware of the official role he was creating by supposedly supporting the Metis in their petitioning efforts.

Clarke was not content with that warning to Dewdney and followed it with a report to his superior, Commissioner Grahame. In this report Clarke blamed the problems on the economic conditions, "... although pretended grievances against the Government are rushed to the front."¹⁰ He also recommended that the Government should be warned, the police force increased in size and the Metis discouraged from taking any violent actions. He based these recommendations on his experience with the Metis. As Clarke said, "I have an intimate knowledge of the character of these Half-breeds and. as you are aware, some influence over them."¹¹ Grahame took Clarke's advice and forwarded the

letter on to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Sir John A. Macdonald.¹²

Clarke's source of information for these letters is revealed in a local history of the events surrounding the Metis Resistance of 1885. In this report we are told that:

The tradition persists that Lawrence Clarke was an active sympathiser with the early stages of the Rebellion. The matter was discussed in the press in May, 1888. Isbister said that he went straight from the meeting which decided to call Riel, to Lawrence Clarke, and that Clarke had said that there will have to be a rebellion. Clarke admitted the visit but claimed that he had turned Isbister out of his office with indignation at his design to bring Riel in (Jefferson, 1929:122).

It is quite conceivable that Clarke did tell Isbister that a rebellion was needed as this would fit into the picture of Clarke's official support for the Metis and unofficial condemnation of the same. Even more interesting is the presence of the letter from Clarke to Grahame in the Canada Sessional Papers. The letter now appears without signature or superscription.¹³ This anonymous origin of the letter is an exception rather than the rule in materials published in the Canada Sessional Papers. Clarke's reputation had been damaged by the talk of his early support of the rebellion and his provocative remark of March 18, 1885. His early warnings and other acts of supplying information to the Government should have been considered acts of courage and support for the Government. In all fairness, the government could have come to Clarke's aid and settled the matter by publically stating how Clarke had kept them abreast of matters as they developed. For that matter, Clarke could have made public his support of the country through his information exchange with high ranking Government officials. That this did not happen seems to indicate that Clarke and the Government were consciously hiding their links. Indeed, there were reasons for this secrecy that will be discussed later.

Clarke is identified as a prime source of information in a letter to Dewdney from Indian Agent J. Ansdell Macrae. This letter was endorsed by Dewdney and forwarded to Macdonald.

L. Clarke Esq., a priest, and one or two Indians are reporting, and have promised to report what they can learn, but there are strong reasons for receiving with the greatest of caution what all, save the former, may impart.¹⁴

It appears that Clarke was a trusted and reliable source of information for Dewdney and Macdonald as well as other Government officials.

It was not as if the Government lacked information on events in the troubled areas. A network of police and civilian 'spys' were reporting on all Metis, Indian and non-native meetings. Their reports included the names of the

leaders, the numbers in attendance and a census of those groups felt to be the most likely to resort to armed resistance. These reports revealed a potential fighting force of less than one thousand. This was hardly enough to warrant the rumours of massacre that spread across the region. The reports also included the grievances and proposed courses of action adopted by the Metis.¹⁵ Riel had been called back to organize a petition for the Government. A petition of rights was prepared and delivered to the Government by all of the groups involved (Stanley, 1965:291). This petition was supposed to be sent with the December 1884 covering letter written and forwarded by Will Henry Jackson; a non-native and Riel's personal secretary. At the last moment it was decided to have the petition and signatures hand delivered to Ottawa.¹⁶

On the 26th of January.... Superintendent Gagnon was now informed that the previously mentioned petition had not been sent to Ottawa. as stated, but was then in process of being signed, with a view to its being forwarded the following month. It appeared that a letter only, as a sort of avant courtier to the petition, had been sent on the before-mentioned occasion.¹⁶

The man chosen to deliver the petition was none other than Lawrence Clarke.

They asked the Hon. Lawrence Clarke, a one-time member of the N.W.T. Council, to proceed to Ottawa and make representations to the government on their behalf (Anonymous, 1935:43).

The Metis chose Clarke because of his official role as a friend and sympathizer. This role was strengthened by an incident reported by historian A.S. Morton. In an interview with Will Henry Jackson's niece, Morton found out that Riel's Metis scout entered a dinner at the Jackson family home in which Riel was in attendance. The scout arrived with a twenty dollar donation for Riel. The donor was Lawrence Clarke and the scout delivered this account of his meeting in Clarke's office.

"How's Riel?" - "How is the movement coming on?" "Here is \$20 for Riel's keep-bring on your rebellion as soon as you can. it will be the making of the country."¹⁷

This incident reaffirms the official role that Clarke so effectively played upon when the Metis were in attendance.

Choosing Clarke to deliver their petition and act as their agent in Ottawa was a logical move. His knowledge of and support for the Metis and their land claims was equally balanced by his social stature and political connections. When Clarke returned and gave the Metis their answer it was not taken and acted upon by a credulous group. Their response was a predictable resort to armed resistance. This action had been taken on an earlier occasion when rumours of a police move against Riel had circulated through the Metis commun-

ity.¹⁸ Clarke's reply to the Metis was also not a simple ease of exaggeration (Stanley, 1963:305). Clarke knew that the Metis were awaiting his reply and would base any future action or plan on his answer. He consciously created a situation in which a Metis resort to arms was inevitable.

Clarke denied making this statement to the Metis. His response to accusations of provoking the resistance was to deny making any comment to the Metis. (Stanley, 1936:443, n. 69). A statement from William McKay makes this denial questionable. McKay was present when the Metis approached Clarke and in his statement on the meeting he said, "I heard the whole of the conversation, the Metis asked Mr. Clarke, what the reply to their petition was,..."¹⁹ This contradicts Clarke's version of the affair. It seems that Clarke was trying to deny his role as the Metis representative in Ottawa. His efforts matched those of the Federal Government in hiding the official and unofficial roles he played in creating the resistance.

An examination of Clarke's movements prior to March 18 strengthen the claim that he deliberately incited the Metis. As the Metis representative in the delivery of the petition it is likely that he met with a high ranking Government official on his trip to Ottawa. On his way back to Prince Albert he met with Dewdney. Dewdney explained the meeting to Macdonald in a letter dated March 12, 1885. He wrote that:

Lawrence Clarke from Prince Albert, whom I first consulted about these men, will be hem to-day, as finding he was on his way to the North from Winnipeg, I wired him to come and see me as I wished to talk over the half-breed reports that have reached me since he left Prince Albert He answered: "Will be up by freight train..."²⁰

Clarke's actions after the meeting, as well as those of Dewdney and Colonel Irvine of the North West Mounted Police, resulted in a series of incidents pointing to Clarke's engineering of a resistance.

On the fourteenth of March Irvine received a request for more troops from Superintendent Crozier. This request came after a number of warning notices from Crozier and Superintendent Gagnon. Both of these men were stationed in the troubled region. On the same day Irvine, in Regina, wired Ottawa for permission to take one hundred men north. After another telegram to Ottawa a reply was received on the fifteenth and authorization was given for a speedy departure as soon as possible. It wasn't until the eighteenth that Irvine set out for the north (Chambers, 1906:85). The delay in departure was odd considering the advance notice and usual display of readiness exhibited by the North West Mounted Police.

After Clarke made his statement on the eighteenth, Crozier notified Dewdney about the new state of affairs in the Prince Albert district. On this same day Clarke wired Dewdney to inform him of the results of his statement. This telegram was sent in code.²¹ This was the same code used by Dewdney and Macdonald in their exchange of telegrams in early 1885. On the nineteenth Dewdney received a telegram from Irvine in Fort Qu'Appelle. Irvine asked

Dewdney "Have you heard anything from Lawrence Clarke"?²² Why would a man like Irvine request an update on the situation from Lawrence Clarke? The police had their own agents and officers on the scene. Crozier was liberal with his reports and there was no lack of information. Clarke's information and confirmation of the results of his statement justified the Government decision to send troops north. The timing of the troop movements to conform with the Metis decision to resist attack left the Government in the position of reacting to 'defiance' rather than acting without cause. The Metis could now be accused of starting the whole affair. This now made it possible for Macdonald to establish a Commission to investigate the land claims of the Metis. This order in council came just four days after the battle at Duck Lake.²³ Just three days before the battle Macdonald sent a telegram to Dewdney advising him of his intention to settle the land claims problem and claiming to be "... not aware of any causes of discontent."²⁴ Accompanying this telegram was a message in code advising Dewdney of a proposed troop mobilization of the militia.²⁴ Macdonald officially took a conciliatory stand and unofficially prepared for war.

It was not surprising that the Government did not make public Clarke's association with them. They had to maintain the public illusion that surrounded their actions and those of Clarke. Clarke managed to maintain the illusion by getting others to report on the troubles. With many reports coming into Regina it was easy for Clarke's notification to get lost in the confusion. He became one of many reporting on a troubled situation. Some of those who reported mentioned their source of information. One such case was the report of Father Andre. He wrote:

On Friday, March 20, as I was saying the morning mass with the sisters, Mr. Thomas Mackay came hurrying to my place; what sorrow I felt when I learned through him that rebellion had broken out among the half-breeds . . . I went immediately to Mr. Clarke's place, who confirmed for me this sad and dismal news.²⁵

The man who initiated the troubles was available to inform or confirm the situation for others.

This creation of an incident by Clarke on behalf of the Government or certain parties therein accounts for the covering up of Clarke's unofficial role as a sympathizer and supporter to the Government position. Clarke's unofficial warnings were not included in the Canada Sessional Papers. Only the official letters in support of the Metis were presented to Parliament. Opposition leader Blake asked for all correspondence between Clarke and the Government.²⁶ Macdonald failed to produce the official letters. Therefore Clarke's dual role remained hidden and this prevented the opposition from identifying Clarke as a man with conflicting roles.

Only one thing remained to do to ignite the struggle so carefully designed by the Government and so perfectly implemented in the field by Clarke. The Metis had been provoked into a defensive response by Clarke's statement. Their

first concern was the collection of arms and other supplies in preparation for the attack. Rumours circulated about proposed Metis attacks, but they did not materialize. Clarke had to find a way to start the conflict. The first incident at Duck Lake provided the catalyst needed to bring the resistance into a state of open warfare.

On March 26, 1885 Sergeant Stewart was in charge of a small team of volunteers and police assigned the task of collecting the supplies and weapons from the store in Duck Lake. This group ran into Gabriel Dumont and a party of scouts. A minor scuffle ensued followed by the retreat of Stewart's force. It appears as if the Metis had the same idea about the supplies in Duck Lake. When Stewart returned to Prince Albert he informed Crozier of the encounter. Crozier decided to follow orders and wait until Irvine and his reinforcements arrived (Black, 1913:280, 282).

There were others with plans of their own.

When Sergeant Stewart's convoy returned to the fort, and Crozier had quite properly given up the idea of making any onslaught upon the armed rioters at Duck Lake, Mr. Clarke and other leading Prince Albert volunteers were so ill advised as, in the hearing of different people, to challenge Crozier "to teach the rebels a lesson if he were not afraid of them" . . . However, it is unfortunately true that he allowed himself to be so influenced by the suggestions of the volunteers that he ordered his men to turn about and proceed to Duck Lake. This act transformed what might have been a passing riot, into a genuine rebellion (ibid).

This version was reinforced by the Cloutier Report commissioned by Archbishop Taché. In this report Father Cloutier discovered that, "... Crozier n'y est allé que sur le taquineries de Lawrence Clarke qui les traitait de Lâches."²⁷ One interesting footnote to the battle at Duck Lake is that, while Clarke was there, he did not participate in the fighting. Instead, he held back the horses. When the order to retreat was sounded, Clarke left in such a hurry that his beaver coat was left behind and found by Moise Ouellette.²⁷

There are three more factors in the chain of evidence that should be considered. First, one justification for the delay in resolving the Metis land claim issue had been the remoteness of the Government from the scene. Transportation and communication links with this troubled region were not advanced enough to allow immediate transfers of information. This position fails upon reviewing the number of responsible and detailed reports received by the Government. Most of these reports recommended a quick settlement favourable to the Metis.²⁸ These reports started coming in years before the 1885 Resistance.

Second, is Stanley's assertion that Clarke's statement may have been in reference to the one hundred man force under Irvine's command (Stanley, 1953:305). This claim is not possible if the reports on Irvine's departure are accurate. The decision was not made until the fifteenth of March and the troops

did not leave until the eighteenth. Clarke left Regina prior to the fifteenth and could not have known about Irvine's orders, unless plans had been devised prior to a request being made for reinforcements. Third. Irvine and his men delayed their departure for two days. This was not in keeping with the tradition of the force.

When looked at in isolation, any one of the events presented might be considered a coincidence. If taken together it appears as if there are too many coincidences to make this conclusion feasible. These events take on the appearance of a plan devised by the Government and Clarke. It required a field agent capable of adapting and shifting the plan to achieve the desired goal. This goal was the incitement to violence that appeared to originate with the Metis.

The two perpetrators of the plan, Clarke and the Government, prepared the ground for revolt in a number of ways. Government actions included the establishment of a Commission to study the Metis grievances, after violence had erupted. They ignored the warnings and recommendations of all people and groups reporting to the Government and calling for a settlement of Metis grievances. Reports from police and civilian agents were largely ignored and information on activities in the troubled region came from unofficial sources. Troop movements were timed to coincide with a Metis resort to arms. The reasons for the Government participating in this scheme will be analyzed elsewhere.²⁹

Historian Donald Creighton provided a hint that suggests a rationale for Government participation. He wrote that:

The two disasters - the revolt on the prairie and the collapse of the railway - had come together in time. And together they might destroy him (Macdonald) and his Canada. Yet the blow which they would deliver was not a single one. They were separate problems. They would have to be dealt with separately. They could even be played off against each other. And in that possibility did not there still lie a real hope? He could use the railway to defend the west. He could use the west to justify the railway (Creighton 1955:417)

This casual coincidence between the C.P.R. crisis and the Metis Resistance now takes on a new light. The chain of events removes the possibility of coincidence from the scene and the well known troubles of the C.P.R. provide the motivation for the plan. The Resistance of 1885 provided the Government with the excuse it needed to once again bail out the C.P.R. Completion of the railway was the major component of the Macdonald Government's national policy. Without an incident the Government may have been put in the position of having to allow the C.P.R. to fail or having to step down as the Government. The coming together of these two crises no longer appears to be coincidental.

The official Lawrence Clarke had an image that made him an attractive choice as an ally for the Metis. His presence and assistance at the St. Laurent founding meeting made the Metis see him as a friend. The role he played in campaigning and petitioning for their land rights reinforced this official image. Choosing Clarke as their representative in 1885 was logical and a stroke of

genius if Clarke's official role was seen as being honest and genuine. It was the unofficial fide of Clarke which made this choice tragic. Unfortunately, the Metis were not privy to the unofficial Clarke. They were not aware of his plans for them as a source of cheap labour in 1872. Few people knew of his participation in the 1875 confrontation between the Metis and Canada. Clarke's role as a Government informant would have made the Metis reconsider his suitability as their representative. His meetings with important officials and possession of the Government code illustrated his real intentions. His actions and plans, his provocative statement of March 18, and his efforts to bring about armed conflict showed Clarke for what he really was. The so called friend of the Metis was prepared to use them and abuse them if it served his interests. When Clarke donated twenty dollars for Riel's keep he knew that an armed resistance would truly be 'the making of the Country'.

NOTES

1. St. Boniface, Societé Historique Du St. Boniface, Taché Papers, Grandin to Taché 29 November 1870.
2. Canada Sessional Papers (C.S.P.), No. 116, 48 Victoria, 1885, p. 1.
3. Calgary, Glenbow Alberta Institute-Archives (GALA), Hardisty Papers. Report of meeting of Metis Winterers 31 December 1871.
4. Hardisry Papers, Clarke to Archibald 17 January 1872.
5. Hardisty Papers, Clarke to Smith 15 January 1872.
6. Ottawa, Public Archives of Canada (P.A.C.), Record Group (R.G.) 18 A1 Volume 6, No. 333, North West Mounted Police Records.
7. Edmonton, Provincial Archives of Alberta (P.A.A.), St. Laurent Chronicles. 1881, D-IV-125.
8. C.S.P. No. 116, 48 Victoria. 1885, pp. 69-75, 80-97.
9. P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, Manuscript Group (M.G.) 26A, Clarke to Dewdney 14 May 1884.
10. P.A.C., R.G. 18 AI Vol. 12, Clarke to Grahame 20 May 1884.
11. Ibid.
12. P.A.C., Macdonald Papers M.G. 26A, Grahame to Macdonald 29 May 1884.

13. C.S.P. NO. 52, 49 Victoria. 29 March 1886. pp. 27-28.
14. P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, M.G. 26A Macrae to Dewdney 5 August 1884.
15. C.S.P. No. 116, 48 Victoria, 1885, pp. 98-113.
16. Ottawa House of Commons Debates 6 July 1885, Vol. IV, p. 3092. C.S.P. No. 116, 48 Victoria, 1885, pp. 110. 112. See also Chambers, 1906:84.
17. Saskatoon. University of Saskatchewan Special Collections, Jackson Papers, MSSC555/2/13.5. Morton interview with Plaxton 25 June 1952,
18. P.A.C.. R.G. 18 A1 Vol. 12, Keenan to Gagnon 25 September 1884,
19. Prince Albert, Prince Albert Historical Society-Archives, Document 120. Declaration of McKay 28 November 1928.
20. P.A.C., Macdonald Papers, M.G. 26A, Dewdney to Macdonald 12 March 1885.
21. GAI-A, Dewdney Papers, Clarke to Dewdney 18 March 1885, pp. 1428-1430.
22. GAI-A, Dewdney Papers, Irvine to Dewdney 19 March 1885, p. 1430.
25. P.A.C. Department Of The Interior Records, R.G. 15 Vol. 227, Order in Council P.C. 688.30 March 1885.
24. P.A.C., Macdonald Papers. M.G. 26A, Macdonald to Dewdney 23 March 1885.
- 25, P.A.A., Oblate Collection, Box 88, D-IV-137, André to Grandin 22 March 1885, Translated from French.
26. Ottawa, House of Commons Debates-1885, Vol. IV, 6 July 1885. p. 3092.
27. P.A.A., Cloutier Report, D-IV-If6, 1886.
28. C.S.P. No. 116, 48 Victoria, 1885, pp. 54-75.
29. For a detailed account of the economic and political factors that provided the motivation and rationale for the creation of the resistance movement, the reader must wait for a future publication of the Gabriel Dumont Institute that will provide an in depth analysis of the Metis people in Saskatchewan and their relations with the Canadian Government.

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