Except for those northern areas that still do not quite fit into the market economy, the European invasion of what we call Canada and the United States of America was completed on the Great Plains and in the American Southwest in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The disappearance of a frontier line and the passing of the frontier that Turner mourned in 1893 marked not only the disappearance of “free land” but also the unfreedom of those whose land it had been. The American frontier myth, from the Pequot War and King Phillip’s War on, had defined itself by violence to Indigenous peoples, while the Canadian frontier myth that began with Champlain and Des Ormeaux and Brébeuf had modulated into a repudiation of violence as American and an exaltation of the Canadian West as being more British, civilized, and fair. Americans killed Indians. Canadians, far more “humanely,” forced them into starvation. Indigenous peoples, however, did not see themselves as doomed and fought back in every way that they could, with physical warfare, with spiritual reawakening, and with reformulation of Indigenous philosophy to be efficacious in
a new age. Two narratives came out of this period of seeming conquest—a whitestream narrative of dominance and an Indigenous narrative of what Gerald Vizenor has called “survivance.” Curiously, however, each nation’s whitestream narrative involves a martyr, and each Indigenous nation’s survivance implies rebirth. For the United States, the martyr was George Armstrong Custer; for Canada, it was Louis David Riel.

Both Custer and Riel had early successful careers that prepared them for their later martyrdom, Custer as the Boy General of the US Civil War and Riel as the successful leader of the Provisional Government at Red River. Custer, especially as he constructed himself in his own letters and other writings, and as his wife, Libby, reconstructed him in her memoirs after his death, was undoubtedly a fascinating character—ambitious, charismatic, and surrounded by a menagerie of dogs, horses, and tamed beasts such as antelope. Libby Custer’s books canonized her husband and demonized the Sioux. Custer as an Indian fighter, both as the perpetrator of the Washita Cheyenne massacre of 1868 and the victim of the Little Bighorn battle of June 1876, was essentially a national figure, not an avatar of the West. The Great Plains, as the site of many of the Indian Wars between the 1850s and 1890s, is the location of both his triumph and his defeat, but it is not central to the Custer story. *Fort Apache*, a 1948 film that both debunks and glorifies Custer, is set in Arizona, and the substitution of desert for Plains and Apaches for Lakotas and Cheyennes is immaterial to the national myth of Custer.3

Riel, on the other hand, is firmly set in the West. His role in the national myth is as the first western rebel. Thus, Preston Manning can—with all seriousness, though aware of the potential humour—portray the rise of the Reform Party (a conservative federal party intended to gain federal influence for the West) as “the third Riel Rebellion.” Since Red River and the North West were the only sites of military campaigns between Aboriginal or Métis and settler forces in Canada after the early days of New France, it would not be possible to transplant Riel within Canadian history, but even had there been other battles, Riel’s identification with the New Nation of the Métis, with the English “half-breeds,” and with the old stock English-speaking settlers of the North West makes him explicitly a man of the Plains. On the one hand, his interest in representing First Nations
peoples and his seemingly contradictory plans to bring more European immigrants to the West link him to all colonization efforts. On the other, his identification first with Manitoba’s entering Confederation, his own election to Parliament (and his surrendering his seat to Georges-Étienne Cartier, Macdonald’s Quebec lieutenant), and finally his wholly involuntary connection to the completion of the CPR make him a national figure. Quebec’s identification with Riel but not with the West also complicates his consideration as national, regional, or international figure. Yet despite their differences, Riel and Custer both served as symbol and synecdoche for their respective federal governments, giving them permission to abrogate treaties and to exert ruthless pressure on Indigenous peoples through outright warfare, starvation, and massive, systematic human rights violations designed to stamp out not only effective Native resistance to the wholesale Euro–North American settlement of the Great Plains but any cultural continuity whatsoever for Indigenous people. The events surrounding Custer and Riel “proved” that the people of the Great Plains were terminally deficient and gave federal governments and popular culture in both countries “permission” to decree complete assimilation or extermination for Plains Indigenous peoples and their philosophies of life.

Both Riel and Custer have spawned scholarly industries trying to establish What Really Happened, primarily at the Battle of the Little Bighorn and at the trial of Louis Riel, as well as a whole historical context for each man. Poets, novelists, painters, composers, and film and video makers have been no less active. Huge, epic “Last Stand” paintings seem to have been the favourite visual medium for Custer, while Riel has been portrayed in plays and sculptures. Other figures from the Little Bighorn and the North West have also been valorized, including Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Rain-in-the-Face (Ista Magazu); the “lone survivor” of Custer’s command, the horse Comanche; and Gabriel Dumont, Big Bear, Poundmaker, and the captives Theresa Gowanlock and Theresa Delaney. We even have scholarly interpretations of interpretations of the Custer myth, including those by Canadian Brian Dippie and Blackfoot/Gros Ventre writer James Welch. What I want to do here is to look at the ways in which the idea of Custer and the idea of Riel have shaped the intellectual history of the Great Plains. Although Custer’s demise in 1876 predates Riel’s hanging by slightly
more than nine years, I will discuss Riel first, simply because the narratives associated with him are more complex and more directly associated with the Great Plains than those of Custer. Then when we return to Custer, we can see what is different and what is simply left out. The next chapter will look in much more detail at Riel in comparison to the Ghost Dance movement on the Great Plains and will examine spiritual and cultural revival rather than political and military imagery.

A 1979 CBC television movie called simply Riel is a treasure trove of images and provides a good place to start, more because of its blithe rewriting of history than because of its historical accuracy or insightful probing of myth and symbol. The film is apparently at least one of the targets of Rex Deverell’s 1985 play Beyond Batoche, which problematizes a Euro–North American television play about Batoche. The young and impatient writer discovers that although he had always seen himself to be Riel, in a pinch, he identifies with Macdonald. The CBC’s Riel begins in the context of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, an artificially American and literally “Wild West” setting. A journalist approaches Gabriel Dumont, who actually did join Buffalo Bill after Batoche, for his reminiscences about Riel, and most of the rest of the film is a flashback to the sharpshooter’s days with Riel, although it also departs to show Macdonald (played by Christopher Plummer), usually in the company of Donald Smith, a Hudson’s Bay man and later a CPR baron. In fact, the film suggests that Riel and Dumont, Macdonald and Smith actually shared the same dream of a united Canada from sea to sea that was home to all—Indians, Métis, British, and French. But the sectarianism and religious fanaticism of the French priests in Montreal and the Orangemen at Red River cause a conflict that ultimately makes enemies of Macdonald and Riel. Macdonald’s grand obsession is the railway, and the film accurately shows that the North West became the crisis that allowed Macdonald to use the railway to ship troops west—and enabled Smith to borrow the money to finish it. Red River is a prelude to the North West, and Dumont is portrayed as having been a participant at The Forks as well as at Batoche. The time between 1870 and 1884 seems to be telescoped into two or three years. Perhaps in order to introduce a strong female character into the movie, Mrs. Schultz, wife of the leader of the Canadian annexationist element, is seen as having an affair with Thomas Scott. The historical
Scott appears to have been a rowdy, perhaps mentally deficient in some way, whose execution at the behest of the Provisional Government would eventually furnish the motive for hanging Riel, but in this rendition of the story, he appears to have walked off some set for *The Great Gatsby* and is one of the leading plotters against the Provisional Government and all it stands for. The film shows the British commander of the forces against Riel in 1885 suitably as Colonel Blimpish, and his victory at Batoche is (accurately) won by Ontario soldiers who mutiny against his vacillation and take the Métis lines. Métis women have little role in the film, and Indian characters are more or less indistinguishable from the Métis, except for their names and occasionally their braids or “medicine man” role.

Although the movie is unintentionally funny some decades later, it provides a lens for examining what Riel has meant to Canadians. For one thing, it is not at all a Prairie view. Riel and Macdonald have the same dream of the Nation, although Riel’s symbol is the cross and Macdonald’s the locomotive. Riel is played as deeply religious but not unorthodox, and his “insanity,” for which he was hospitalized, seems to be a temporary nervous breakdown in response to his harassment by Schulz and the other Protestant settlers and his being barred from taking his seat as an MP. (Macdonald is portrayed as showing Riel a back door to the Parliament buildings so he can escape the vicious Orange [Protestant] mobs who are howling for his death in retaliation for the execution of Thomas Scott.) Riel dies a martyr’s death, a sacrifice to the powers that be, in thanksgiving for the completion of the railway, the salvation of the nation. The television movie also accepts Indian complicity in the uprising—as had Riel and virtually all scholars until nearly the present.\(^9\) It ignores the problems of the West at the time: lack of secure land titles for the Métis, crop failure and land claim problems among non-Métis settlers, and starvation and abrogation of treaty rights among the Crees. It also undervalues the Provisional Government at Red River.

None of this is necessarily the fault of the film or its writers and researchers. The story of Louis Riel and all the lives and stories that have come to be associated with him is enormously complex. Despite many superficial similarities, the differences between Red River in 1869–70 and the North West in 1884–85 are important. The idea that Métis and Indians
were natural allies against Euro–North American settlers was unexamined by all but the Indians for at least a century. And Riel’s use as both a positive and a negative symbol by Quebecois, westerners, and even various groups of mixed-blood and Indigenous peoples further complicates the issue. Custer, by contrast, is a relatively one-dimensional character whose meaning changes along with public perceptions of the federal government and of Indians.

Louis Riel, Sr., had been one of the Métis leaders in the Guillaume Sayer case of 1849, in which the Métis broke the Hudson’s Bay Company monopoly on trade in Red River and gained free access to the markets in Minnesota. As one of the few European-educated Métis in Red River in 1869, as well as the son of his father, Louis, Jr., was a logical leader of the Red River people as they met the Canadians after the easterners’ completely unilateral annexation of Rupert’s Land. As Doug Owram has shown, the Ontario expansionists believed their own rhetoric about the inhabitants of Red River calling out to be relieved of the feudal yoke of the Hudson’s Bay Company and being eager to join the world of the up-and-coming Ontario merchants and settlers. John Christian Schultz’s paper, *The Nor’ Wester*, had been started to promulgate such opinions, and at least some children of the fur trades, such as Alexander Kennedy Isbister, shared them.10 Under other circumstances, bourgeois Métis such as the Riel family might well have been willing to join the Ontarians, but that was never, in fact, an option. Such a union ignored both the role of religion and the social structure of Red River: it is hard to make cause with someone who blackguards both your racial ancestry and your religion, and the annexationists were blunt about “half-breeds” and “Papists.” As Sylvia Van Kirk and other scholars have shown, the gendered mobility of Métis society was putting enormous stress on family relations and overall social structure at this time. Young Métis women could marry “up” into Canadian society, but their brothers were regarded by the Canadians as not only unworthy of marrying into Canadian society but even unworthy of maintaining control of economic power in the territory.11 Much the same pressure existed in other mixed-blood peoples of the Americas, and toward the end of his life, Riel himself envisioned Canadian Métis children being educated in Latin American countries, leading to a saving relationship for the Métis.12
Métis society was an outgrowth of the fur trade. While the Hudson’s Bay Company traders originally tried to wall themselves off from relationships with Native women, the Montreal traders realized that such separation was completely unworkable. The traders needed Native women to help them survive, to prepare furs, and to establish the kinship networks that were the foundation for Indigenous trading patterns. Hudson’s Bay Company traders could not remain aloof and succeed, so they, too, took wives according to the custom of the country. The children of the fur trade for the most part stayed in the fur trade. Women became the wives of new European factors and men married other mixed-blood women or Indigenous women. Only a few children were assimilated or even chose to be assimilated into actual European society, while a larger proportion chose or happened to live with their mother’s people and to be accepted as Indigenous.

George Simpson, long-serving governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, however, changed the pattern by putting aside his “country wife” and marrying his young cousin, Frances, who was soon followed by other English wives, drastically reducing the social status of mixed-blood women. Julie Lagimodiere, on the other hand, the first full-blood European girl born in Red River, married Louis Riel, Sr., himself mixed-blood, and she and her sisters and other French-Canadian women fit smoothly into the French, Catholic, Métis society. Nonetheless, the influx of large numbers of young, single Anglo-Canadian men into Red River in the 1860s once again provided potential husbands for young mixed-blood women but marginalized mixed-blood men both socially and economically, especially as an agrarian society rapidly replaced a fur trade and hunting society.

In 1869, Louis Riel was in a precarious position. His father had died. It seems likely that Louis, Jr., had been rejected by the family of his Montreal sweetheart because he had no particular prospects for making a living. The annexation crisis represented an opportunity. He threw himself into the leadership of the Provisional Government and managed both to maintain control of the situation in Manitoba and to negotiate with Ottawa the status of the Red River settlements as the province of Manitoba. Had Riel and the Provisional Government not succumbed to the imprecations of Thomas Scott and ordered his execution, Riel would not have provided a martyr to rally the Orange annexationists from Ontario, and he might have
had a successful political career in Manitoba. This seems unlikely, however. Although the Canadians had attempted to enter Rupert’s Land before they had legal authority, that authority was coming, and few central or eastern Canadians appreciated the niceties of international law that made the Provisional Government legal. They simply saw ungrateful half-breeds turning down the gracious offer of annexation. Macdonald had popular Canadian backing and the full co-operation of the British government in sending to the West an expeditionary force to defeat the Métis. And the Métis prudently left Fort Garry before Colonel Garnet Wolseley and his troops arrived. From founder of Manitoba and Member of Parliament, Riel went to being a fugitive, banned from Canada for five years, more as a sop to the angry Orangemen than for any actual crime or act of rebellion.15

Combined with his political career throughout his life was Riel’s attempt to obtain from the Canadian government some kind of reparation for his economic losses or compensation recognizing the truly masterly way, except for the execution of Scott, that he had maintained order and avoided violence in a very precarious situation in Red River. Riel’s detractors have claimed that his requests for some kind of pension or indemnity to help support himself and his family prove that he was in the Métis cause only for the money and that he would have been willing to sell out his allies at any juncture had Macdonald only been ready to buy.16 This not only oversimplifies Riel, it oversimplifies the whole class basis of Métis society at the time of Confederation. During Riel’s years in Montana in the early 1880s, he was able to marry and to support his beginning family on a very meagre schoolteacher’s salary. Given his education, his experiences, and his belief in his own prophetic calling, it is hard to picture him as a homesteader or even as a miller like his father. Although he may have lived briefly with buffalo hunters in the Dakotas before moving to Montana, he had neither the training nor the ambition to be a hunter.17 He had had the experience of being elected to Parliament and then prohibited from taking his seat. He was far too controversial to have been a John Norquay, the first Métis politician to gain considerable success in Manitoba as provincial premier from 1878 to 1887;18 by 1890 and the Manitoba School Question, a divisive national fight over the use of French-language instruction, it was clear that no one else would follow the late John Norquay’s career pattern, either.
In some ways, both the Red River Provisional Government and the Exovedate, the religiously based governing body Riel established at Batoche, were formalized resistance on the part of the young men who had been the elite of mixed-blood fur trade society and who had become or would become marginalized in the new settler society. In US terms, they would have been similar to Andrew Jackson’s followers—frontiersmen challenging the Virginia and New England elites. But Jackson was elected to the presidency, and his followers were known as Indian fighters; the Jacksonians almost certainly included a few people of mixed-blood descent, but they did not identify as anything other than European-descended. The Provisional Government’s execution of Thomas Scott was not unusual at a time when capital punishment was common, accepted, and swift in both Great Britain and the United States as well as Canada, but the idea that Riel, as the leader of a group of Catholic “half-breeds” had “murdered” a man portrayed as an up-and-coming Protestant from Ontario ensured broad Canadian support for both the persecution of Métis individuals after the arrival of Wolseley’s army and for the general supplantation of the Métis in Manitoba. The execution of Scott may have been factually and procedurally justified, but it was a political disaster, an excuse for throwing out the Provisional Government with its alliance of Métis, English “half-breeds” and other fur trade peoples, and the descendants of the Scots Selkirk and Swiss Demeurons settlers, and for replacing them over the next two decades, after the defeat and death of Norquay, with the annexationist elite led by Schultz and the incoming Ontarians. Métis scrip, issued to resolve Métis land claims, allowed some Métis to locate and develop farms, but like most of the scrip programs in the US upon which it was based, its main beneficiaries were speculators who were able to scoop up concentrated areas of first-rate land on the cheap by exploiting the need of cash-poor Métis who expected to be able to re-establish themselves further west.

Native people, as opposed to the Métis, played relatively small roles in both the Red River and Northwest Resistance movements. In most accounts of Red River, their roles are virtually invisible. The annexationists, apparently blithely unaware of the fear that the idea of an “Indian uprising” evoked in settlers—especially when some of the Dakota people involved in the Minnesota Uprising of less than a decade earlier had taken refuge in
Manitoba—tried briefly to raise Indian allies against the Métis, a scheme that was quickly squelched by more politic members of the movement. That the Indians considered the suggestion, however, indicates that they did not see their cause as identical to that of the Métis and the old settlers. By 1869, Native peoples throughout the Great Plains had only to look east, south, or west to recognize that their autonomy was severely threatened and that migration was at best only a temporary option that would place them in the homelands of another people who were also severely threatened. Resistance was sometimes counterproductive (as in Minnesota) and sometimes temporarily successful (as in the Red Cloud War of the late 1860s in Montana and the Dakotas), but there were no extant examples of anything that looked like a satisfactory long-term solution. Indigenous peoples on the Canadian Prairies were anxious to protect their lands and buffalo as much as possible from the new Canadian expansionists. While the Canadians wanted peace and land cessions, Aboriginal people sought treaties that would give them the best chance of protecting a land base and obtaining assistance in converting their economies to a subsistence- and commercial-based form of agriculture. Although, as events would prove, no faction would be a worthwhile ally to the Prairie Indigenous people, the annexationist Ontarians were a better bet simply because they would be the winners and wield the power. Indigenous leaders with centuries of diplomatic history dealing with other tribes, mixed-blood groups, Europeans, and Euro–North Americans were not naive in their choices.

Except for small-scale reprisals against the Métis after the arrival of Wolseley, the Red River Resistance seemingly ended peacefully and almost hopefully, though the promises given to the Provisional Government were never fully implemented by the Canadians. At first sight, the resolution of the conflict represented the triumph of the “civilized” British way of handling “Natives” as opposed to the Wild West formula of the Americans. As Owram has shown, Canadians since at least the 1850s had rather smugly contrasted their system of Indian affairs, based on treaties and courts, with the constant frontier warfare of the United States. The whole ethos of the North West Mounted Police as embellished by both historians and fiction writers contrasted the straight-dealing, scarlet-coated Mounties, relying on a personal manliness animated by the weight and civilizing justice of
empire, with the two-gun craziness and military might of the Americans, enforcing the newest edicts of treaty-breaking governments in Washington. The public reason for the formation of the NWMP, after all, was to protect Native Canadians and Canadian territory from the violent lawlessness of American whiskey traders.22

The Northwest Resistance of 1885, discussed in detail in the next chapter, finished with a British-led army, as at Red River, investing Riel’s home settlement at Batoche. Like the Minnesota Uprising, it was followed by trials, hangings, and imprisonments, but also by a vengeful and counterproductive agricultural policy and religious suppression forced on the Plains Cree, Assiniboines, and, to a lesser extent, Blackfoot in the late 1880s and 1890s. All of this was thinkable only because the resistance allowed Canadians to accept the demonization of Indians. Later, in the popular Euro-Canadian mind, the Northwest Resistance became Canada’s fling at having a Wild West, as the 1979 film and the continuing summer dramatizations of “The Trial of Louis Riel” in Regina every year demonstrate.23 Not nearly as dramatic as the Custer battle, perhaps—a poor thing, but our own. And Sitting Bull had toured with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West only a few years before Gabriel Dumont, Riel’s Saskatchewan lieutenant, joined the show.

The Battle of the Little Bighorn, coming between the two resistances led by Riel, is valuable for its symbolism, not for its military significance. It was by no means the most costly battle of the US Indian Wars—when Little Turtle, leading his Miamis and allied Shawnees, defeated Arthur St. Clair’s troops in 1791, they killed more than six hundred US soldiers, three times the American losses at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Like Custer’s defeat, St. Clair’s defeat rallied public opinion against Indigenous peoples—this time of the Ohio Valley—and the fledgling Republic poured its money into the military, enabling Mad Anthony Wayne to defeat Little Turtle three years later. Little Turtle, like the Cree leaders Big Bear and Poundmaker nearly a century later, turned to accommodation as the best way to gain living room for the Miamis and Shawnees. His opposition to the charismatic Shawnee brothers Tecumseh and Tenkwatawa prior to the War of 1812 and Tecumseh’s death with General Brock at the Battle of the Thames in 1813 ensured that neither the British nor the Shawnees and
Miamis would ever again regain control of the Ohio Valley. St. Clair’s defeat came at the beginning of the United States of America’s wars with the Indigenous peoples, when the outcome of both the wars and the new Republic itself were genuinely in doubt. Americans celebrated Wayne’s victory, not St. Clair’s defeat, in order to encourage themselves in their conquest of the continent. Custer’s defeat also encouraged Euro-Americans to concentrate men and money in a battle against Indigenous people, but this time the defeat represented no actual threat—just an occasion for a rededication to the American project of what by then was known as Manifest Destiny. The battle was fought on 25–26 June 1876. Perhaps Custer, who had characteristically disobeyed orders in going ahead and engaging what turned out to be an overwhelmingly large Lakota, Dakota, and Cheyenne encampment, anticipated news of his great victory being announced at the Centennial celebrations upcoming in Philadelphia on the Fourth of July, Independence Day. The news, of course, turned out to be rather different.

The year 1876 was not only the centennial year, but also a presidential election year. Ulysses S. Grant, the general who had saved the Union, would be stepping down. The dashing Custer, who had made brevet general during the Civil War, would not have been an implausible candidate—certainly he was better known than another Civil War general from Ohio who did become president after a disputed election, Rutherford B. Hayes. Despite his Union background, Custer would have been a far better candidate for his own party, the Democrats, than Samuel Tilden of New York, who still battled Hayes to a dead heat. Part of the Custer legend is that he deliberately entered Sitting Bull’s encampment to secure a great victory and a nomination by acclamation, though his own letters to his wife give no indication that he was hankering to be president. Whatever Custer wanted, he certainly achieved posthumous fame. And, like the 1885 Northwest Resistance in Saskatchewan and its enormous value to Ottawa, if Custer’s Last Stand had not existed, someone in Washington would have had to invent it in order to justify the wholesale abrogation of treaties (already underway) and the scorched earth policy that had all Native people confined to reservations, and then had the reservations halved and halved again and finally alienated through allotment.
In 1871, the US Senate abolished the treaty-making process between the United States and the groups Chief Justice John Marshall had called “domestic dependent nations” in his famous *Worcester v. Georgia* decision. Grant’s Peace Policy had distributed the various reservations to the Quakers, Catholics, Episcopalians, and Methodists to administer, hoping to get rid of the graft in the Indian service. Unfortunately, it turned out that men of the cloth could be as venal and corrupt as anyone else and perhaps even more self-righteous. The Peace Policy was collapsing under its own contradictions as well as the inherent contradictions of the musical-chairs nature of US Indian policy, which kept concentrating Indigenous peoples and moving them away from land desired by Euro-Americans. Custer’s own 1874 reconnaissance of the Black Hills and his publicizing of the gold discovered there initiated the breakup of the Great Sioux Reservation and propelled the Lakotas west in 1876, in violation of the newly disseminated rules for where they were to stay. The whole Seventh Cavalry was dispatched to bring them back, and that campaign plus the subsequent campaigns of Generals Crook, Miles, Terry, and others were far more important than Custer’s contributions in confining the Sioux. The victorious villages scattered after the Little Bighorn, with many going north to Canada in search of the same refuge that the Dakotas had found after 1862. Sitting Bull argued that Lakota aid to the British and Shawnees during the War of 1812 entitled his people to refuge, but the Canadians and the British Crown turned a deaf ear. The Lakotas could stay, but they could not claim any land, and there was eventually nothing to eat, no more buffalo and not even the meagre rations available to Canadian Indians. And so Sitting Bull and his remaining people came back to the United States and to Standing Rock Reservation, where Sitting Bull would eventually meet his death at the hands of Indian police.

A century after the Little Bighorn, more had been written about that battle than any other in America except for Gettysburg. Since the bicentennial year, Custer and his battle have attracted even more ink, especially during President Ronald Reagan’s belligerently patriotic “Morning in America” years and in response to the significant archaeological finds that emerged after a fire cleared the battlefield area in 1983. Just as important, AIM (American Indian Movement) and Vine Deloria, Jr.’s book *Custer Died*
*for Your Sins* (1966) have made Custer as vital a symbol of American Indian resistance and revitalization as he had a century earlier been a symbol for American Indian extinction and assimilation. He has become the symbol of everything arrogant and bloodthirsty that Euro-Americans have ever done to American Indians—a rather heavy weight to bear.

If Canadian television producers in 1979 felt the need to set Louis Riel in the context of the Wild West, *Custer’s Last Stand* was the Wild West, its re-enactment the penultimate act of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. If only Buffalo Bill manage to woo Sitting Bull and other actual Lakota and Cheyenne fighters to his entertainment, he had himself, he proclaimed, taken the “First Scalp for Custer,” killing a Cheyenne man named Yellow Hair (not Yellow Hand, as early scholars stated) in hand-to-hand combat during a “minor skirmish” on 17 July 1876. While revenge killing of those who had killed one’s kinsmen or friends was sometimes part of Cheyenne and Lakota warfare, it was not supposed to be part of the US Army’s method of operation, even for a somewhat freelance scout. Since Cody almost immediately returned to Chicago to use Yellow Hair’s scalp in his own stage re-enactment of Custer’s Last Stand, one could argue that he murdered the Cheyenne man solely to obtain a unique theatrical prop. Controversy relating to Riel is, generally speaking, confined to the factual, though the theatrical is certainly a part of all the artistic representations of the man and his cause. With Custer, the real became an artifact of the dramatic, and the participants in the act, at least the survivors, became participants in the re-enactment. Yellow Hair’s scalp became a ghoulish trope for the way Custer’s history had completely mixed artifact and symbol. The only really clear result of the Battle of the Little Bighorn was permission to kill Indians—and Cody the scout took the scalp for Cody the actor. Meanwhile, Miles, Crook, and company had begun a war of attrition against the American Indians that ended its active phase at Wounded Knee in December 1890 but has never hung up its symbolic rifle. The colour and pageantry of Custer’s Last Stand has effectively drawn public attention and historians’ interest away from the systematic bilking of American Indians in the near century and a half since.

By 1876, the United States already had a transcontinental railroad and others were furiously being built. America was aggressively bringing
the “Indian territory” it had established in the Great Plains into the settler nation. But Custer’s martyrdom not only justified the future repression and dispossession of Native people, it justified “the land of the free and the home of the brave” upon the occasion of its centennial. It also fed the belief that all the previous Indian wars, from the Pequot War through the Battle of Fallen Timbers and onward, had been just. Indians were bad guys who deserved to be conquered. Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century and all through the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, historians and creators of popular culture have focussed on Custer—and Riel. Indians fall out of the history books in both countries, and continuing bureaucratic dispossession, particularly in the United States, has proceeded merrily on.

The final act of Custer’s Last Stand did not take place until December 1890 at Wounded Knee. Crazy Horse’s people came back from Canada in 1877 and Crazy Horse died in the guardhouse at Fort Robinson in September at the hands of the soldiers—assisted by Crazy Horse’s former friends. Sitting Bull’s people gradually drifted back to the United States, managed to find sanctuary as individuals with Canadian groups, or finally accompanied their chief back in 1881. Little of the land set aside for Lakota reservations was suitable for agriculture, but by 1890, Lakota people were beginning to accept allotted land that allowed subsistence hunting in riverine forests, especially along the Missouri, and even to begin raising cattle along with their horse herds. Food was often scarce. Social breakdowns came from the outlawing and repression of Lakota religious practices including the Sun Dance, from dividing tiyospayes (extended family units) into nuclear families on individual land, and from taking children from their parents to go to boarding schools and returning the survivors without the skills relevant to either reservation life or off-reservation success. As was true in Red River in 1869, the stresses were partially gender specific. Women’s roles in child care, cooking, clothes making, and gathering were certainly changed—particularly by the boarding schools and the instruction given by woman missionaries—but were still reasonably intact. Unlike Mandan and Hidatsa women, Lakota women had largely given up horticulture when they came onto the Plains and devoted themselves more to the preparation of buffalo meat and hides. In the reservation era, to be sure, they cooked beef instead of bison and tanned and worked cowhides, but
they still tended children, picked berries, and sold such things as beaded moccasins to traders and tourists for cash or basic staples. Men, on the other hand, were displaced. Warfare against either Euro-North Americans or other Indigenous peoples was prohibited. There were no more buffalo to hunt, and off-reservation trips in search of elk or other large game were also prohibited. By 1890, the Sun Dance had been outlawed, and a generation of consistent missionizing and religious persecution had forced most traditional ceremonies and healings underground, seriously undercutting the role and livelihood of doctors and priests. If farming had been viable, it undoubtedly would have become a very popular pursuit for Lakota men, since the traditional way for Lakota men to gain esteem was to distribute food to the poor, but the reservations combined semi-arid land with a lack of agricultural implements, draft animals, and seed. Herding and hauling provided an occupation for some men, and a position on the Indian police afforded authority, but most men found a meagre subsistence and a strong sense of redundancy. Thus, it is not surprising that the Ghost Dance spread widely among the Lakotas when messengers bought it back from the Paiutes in 1889.