The quarter century between 1865 and 1890 saw the completion of transcontinental railways in both the United States and Canada, the slaughter of the buffalo herds, and the nearly complete disruption of the golden age of the horse-buffalo-Sun Dance culture that had begun only two centuries before. In response to this Armageddon, messianic movements developed, flourished briefly, and were put down in blood and bullets. Although historians are familiar with this general framework and have studied in detail both the two resistance movements led by Louis Riel (mostly on the Canadian side) and the Ghost Dance (mostly on the US side), no one has attempted to compare and contrast these two movements. In addition, although James Mooney, Michael Hittman, Thomas Flanagan, Manfred Mossman, Gilles Martel and others have looked at the various Christian antecedents and analogues of the Great Plains messiah religions, no one has examined the parallels between these two movements and first- and second-century Christianity.¹ This last may seem a strange comparison, but it is probably misleading to try to discuss Christian influences on the
Ghost Dance without first exploring the ways in which early Christianity, as it sought to define itself in an imperial world of rapidly changing material conditions, was itself a Ghost Dance religion. Messianic religions have arisen all over the world where small tribal groups face larger, technologically or militarily superior groups. Similarities, then, may result from similar human responses to similar human situations, and not from borrowing.

After Manitoba became a province, many Métis left Red River for the Saskatchewan River country. When Canadian settlers also moved north and west, the Métis were once again embroiled in land claims, and recalled Riel, who by then was in Montana, to negotiate for them. This time, however, the conflict ended in 1885 in bloodshed, with battles between the Métis and a few Indians on one side and the North West Mounted Police, regular troops, and volunteer soldiers from Ontario and Quebec on the other. The troops were able to take the Métis village of Batoche, and Riel was tried and convicted of treason (although he was an American citizen) and hanged in November 1885. Riel had tried to foment a general Indian uprising, but most Indians stayed true to their treaties and kept the peace. Nonetheless, some young men who had used the unrest to settle old scores with individual whites and some leaders whose men had been involved in hostilities were hanged or imprisoned.

The 1890 Ghost Dance began in Nevada with the Paiute prophet Wovoka and soon spread widely throughout the US West. Wovoka told followers that if they danced a certain round dance, they would be able to visit dead relatives and the present world would pass away, to be succeeded by the world of old-time Indians and plentiful game. The Lakota people of North and South Dakota were among the most avid Ghost Dancers, but the prophetic movement turned to tragedy there. Like the Métis, the Lakotas had serious land-rights concerns with the federal government, and the combination of political agitation and a messianic dance movement frightened Indian agents into provoking violence. When Indian police came to arrest Standing Rock leader Sitting Bull (of Little Bighorn fame) in December of 1890, a scuffle ensued in which Sitting Bull, some of his family and followers, and several Indian police were shot and killed. Frightened dancers from Sitting Bull’s and other bands were pursued by the army into the South Dakota badlands. When they came in to surrender
to the troops at Wounded Knee Creek on Pine Ridge agency, another scuffle ensued between the troops and some men reluctant to surrender their guns. The troops, who surrounded the Indians, fired and continued to fire as the Lakotas fled. The bloodshed ended the widespread following of the Ghost Dance religion.²

North America has certainly had its share of revivalistic religious movements, probably far more than have been recorded. The first of which we have a record seems to have been what resulted in the League of the Iroquois some time in the sixteenth century. According to Alice Kehoe, “A saintly stranger, Dekanawidah, came among the Iroquois fervently seeking to create peace among their constantly warring communities.”³ Teamed with Hiawatha and later the war chief Thadodaho, Dekanawidah established a strong league of peace that was, nevertheless, fearsome to its enemies. After the French and Indian War and the American Revolution, when the Iroquois no longer held a commanding position among European or Euro–North American powers, another prophet arose among the Iroquois, Handsome Lake, who also preached peace and revitalization. He may well have been influenced by the Christian eighteenth-century Great Awakening and may in turn have influenced the nineteenth-century revivalism of the nearby “burned-over district” of New York State and its most famous prophetic movement, Mormonism. In the eighteenth century, Pontiac’s Rebellion was to some extent a revitalization movement, while in the nineteenth century, the Shawnee Prophet Tenkwatawa and his brother, the war chief Tecumseh, led one of the most far-reaching and successful Native American revitalization movements.

Nineteenth-century white revivalism included the Shakers, whose worship ceremonies featured dance, and other more localized groups. Nor were false messiahs absent. Although William Dean Howells’s novel The Leatherwood God is fiction, it is an astute psychological study of early nineteenth-century American messianic yearning.⁴ In this case, the messiah is clearly depicted as self-deceived, but the focus is on the enormous desire of a small group of supposedly self-reliant men and women of the frontier to see themselves as being in the centre of the world, rather than in the middle of nowhere. Although these settlers are the dispossessors rather than the dispossessed, their hunger for meaning and stability are a gauge
for the needs that would be expressed in the messianism at Batoche and Wounded Knee.

One could, of course, catalogue many more revivalistic movements among both Native and white peoples during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in North America, but let us move on to look at the specific intellectual histories of Louis Riel and the Lakota Ghost Dancers. The young Louis was raised as a Catholic and was particularly close to his mother and to his sister Sara, each in her own way an exceptionally pious woman. Sara would become a missionary nun, and Louis was picked as one of four promising boys from Red River to be sent to Montreal to study for the priesthood. Although he would leave the seminary before attaining holy orders, he was thoroughly schooled in the ultramontane style of Montreal’s Bishop Ignace Bourget. As George Stanley points out, Bourget’s particular brand of nationalistic ultramontanism is crucial to understanding Riel’s later interpretation of what he took to be his own sacred mission. Ultramontanism was simply an authoritarian form of Catholicism that required its practitioners to settle doctrinal questions by going “across the mountain” to the Pope. Bourget linked his ultramontanism to French-Canadian nationalism, supporting the Patriotes who took to arms to demand responsible government in 1837–38. The connection of language, faith, and armed rebellion would remain vivid for Riel, while he dreamed of replacing the Pope with a Pope of the New World—none other than Bishop Bourget. Riel kept up a correspondence with the bishop even after leaving Montreal, and one of Bourget’s fairly commonplace letters of encouragement to Riel became for the younger man a written guarantee that he was truly inspired by God as His prophet of the New World. Bourget’s strong distaste for Durham’s Report, written in response to the rebellions of 1837–38, became part of the intellectual underpinning of contemporary Quebec separatism, and the general tenor of that argument, with its emphasis on pur laine Quebeckers, is itself a kind of revitalization movement, albeit without the messianism. Although Bourget never accepted any of Riel’s prophecies—and died on 8 June 1885, as Riel was awaiting his trial, without comment on Batoche—he clearly influenced Riel’s ideas of what would be necessary for his New World prophecy and papacy. Since as Bishop of Montreal his residence was on Mont Saint Joseph and he organized a confraternity for the perpetual
devotion to St. Joseph, he probably also influenced Riel in his devotion to the earthly father of Jesus, whom Riel would successfully petition to have installed as the patron saint of the Métis.5

The Ghost Dance also has a distinct and reasonably clear immediate intellectual heritage. James Mooney believed that Wovoka, the prophet/messiah of the 1890 Ghost Dance, had been influenced by Smohallah and the Northwest Pacific Coast Shakers. He had definitely been influenced both by traditional Paiute ceremonies and by the 1870 Paiute Ghost Dance led by Wodziwob (an appellation that may be a title rather than a personal name). Wodziwob prophesied that if the Paiutes danced a variation of their traditional round dance, their beloved dead would return from the grave. This religion was fairly short-lived and Wodziwob seems to have given up on it, but it was taken up by California Indians who had recently suffered horrifying persecution and loss of life and, according to Russell Thornton, continues in the form of Bole Maru. By the late 1880s, Wovoka—or Jack Wilson, a younger Paiute man whose father had apparently been one of Wodziwob’s associates—began to prophesy and, as figured by Mooney, on New Year’s Day, 1889, during a total eclipse of the sun, he fell into a trance. After his return to consciousness, he reported a visit to a green land where the dead lived again and hunted and gathered plenteous game, nuts, and other traditional foods. Wovoka called for Paiutes to live peacefully and in harmony with their white neighbours, but he also called upon them to dance a version of the round dance that would allow them to visit their beloved dead in trances and that would eventually bring the green land of the spirits, with all the game and plants that he had seen, to replace the everyday world of white settlers and mines.6

If Bishop Bourget was Riel’s spiritual teacher, Wovoka was the far more precise and proximate source of the Lakota Ghost Dance. His message spread rapidly to the south, east, north, and west, and interested Indians took the train to Mason Valley, Nevada, to meet this prophet or messiah and to bring his dance and message home to their own kin. While Riel certainly distorted Bourget’s teachings far beyond anything the Montrealer would have recognized, the various messengers to Wovoka and home again were dealing with more syncretic traditions that allowed each group to compose its own Ghost Dance songs, develop distinctive forms of the round dance,
and use individual symbols, but still have reference to Wovoka’s teachings. Several Lakota men, including Short Bull, Kicking Bear, and Good Thunder, were among the delegates to Wovoka, and they returned as apostles of the Ghost Dance, instructing fellow Lakotas on most of the reservations in the songs, movements, and regalia of the dance. The Lakota form of the Ghost Dance utilized a centre pole reminiscent of the Sun Dance, which had been banned less than a decade earlier. Because most Ghost Dance songs were either given by the spirits to the dancers while they were in the trance or were composed by the dancers to describe what they had seen in the spirit world, the Lakotas soon developed their own repertoire of music. A distinctive aspect of Lakota regalia was that the Ghost Dance shirts were thought to be bullet-proof. Although Indian agents, missionaries, and journalists often took this to mean that the Lakotas intended to attack whites in order to hasten the return of the old world of the buffalo and the beloved dead, the Lakotas’ justified mistrust of the soldiers and even their own Indian police probably caused their interest in protection against guns.

Both the Riel uprisings and the various forms of the Ghost Dance, like other messianic movements worldwide, were responses to social, political, and economic forces, as well as to religious inspiration. Russell Thornton points out that the 1890 Ghost Dance was adopted most often by groups who were experiencing marked cultural change and unusually rapid population loss—as was the case among the Lakotas, who were suffering from epidemics of measles and other diseases and had not even had time to adapt to reservation life before their land base was once again halved by allotment and the sale of “surplus” lands. Like the Crees and Assiniboines during the starving winter of 1883–84 immediately preceding the return of Louis Riel to Canada, in 1889–90 the Lakotas found their promised rations slashed by a distant government that seemed willfully ignorant of both the treaties they had signed and of actual conditions on the Great Plains. Both the Lakotas and the Métis feared, with good reason, that their population would be swallowed up by immigrants from the East. In addition, the Saskatchewan Métis as well as the English-speaking settlers in Saskatchewan in 1884–85 were increasingly exasperated by Ottawa’s failure to respond to their request for secure land titles, relief from crop failure, and the other issues they reasonably believed their government should address.
In both Saskatchewan and the Dakotas, the connections among the demographic and socio-political factors, the religious revitalization movement, and armed conflict with government forces was not a simple case of cause and effect. Nor were there any clear lines of connection between the Métis and the Ghost Dancers. The Métis did not attack the police because of Riel’s prophecies, nor did the army attack the Ghost Dancers out of pure religious intolerance. Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont hoped that by commanding the police to retreat, they would get Ottawa to recognize their provisional government and to enter into negotiations about the land claims. Riel’s vocation as a prophet became important only when the Exovedate, his provisional government at Batoche, recognized the Duck Lake victory as a sign that God favoured their cause. Despite US government sanctions against Native religious practices, the army did not attack any Ghost Dancers except the Lakotas. Not everyone who suffered extreme demographic and cultural deprivation joined a revivalistic movement. Although the Ghost Dance was adopted by Dakota groups in Saskatchewan and survived there until the 1960s, neither the Plains Cree and Assiniboines, who arguably suffered the worst of anyone during the 1883–84 winter, nor the various bands of the Blackfoot Confederacy ever adopted the Ghost Dance. Except for a relatively few individuals, neither did the Indians join Riel’s call to arms, and most of those who did commit violent acts were inspired by the rumours of unrest to settle personal scores. As Stonechild and Waiser have shown, the Canadian Plains peoples maintained allegiance to their treaties, and even the non-treaty Dakotas avoided bloc support for the Métis. Since the Gros Ventres, near neighbours of the Blackfeet, were Ghost Dancers, like their Arapaho kinsmen whom Mooney studied, the Blackfoot would certainly have had a chance to hear about the Ghost Dance. The Crees might have learned about it from the Saskatchewan Dakotas, though Kehoe’s chronology indicates that the Dakotas might have become converts so shortly before the Wounded Knee massacre that they would not have had time to pass it on before the tragedy abruptly stopped the quick adaptation of the ceremony. Sitting Bull and Riel may have known each other shortly before Sitting Bull’s surrender and return to the United States from Canada. Though the two exiled political leaders might have seemed to have had much in common, it is unlikely that Sitting Bull would have
appreciated Riel’s Catholicism or that Riel would have deigned to notice Sitting Bull’s prophetic and religious traditions. Although Riel desperately wanted Indigenous allies, particularly at Batoche, he valued Indians as constituents of the Métis “race,” not as separate cultures with their own traditions and aspirations. Hanged in 1885, Riel did not witness the Ghost Dance, but there is no reason to believe that he would have appreciated it or that he would have seen Wovoka’s or other Ghost Dancers’ visions as parallel to his own. As much as any of the missionaries, he hoped to see all the Indians become Catholics.

Even within each movement, there was not a clear relationship between secular and sacred quests. Logically, of course, there was little point in trying to protect “surplus” land if one expected to see a new green earth unrolled over all the land, not just the reservations. Unlike Euro-North American millenarians, however, who sold their possessions and awaited the end of the world, the Ghost Dancers and the Métis were pragmatic people who wanted their children to survive and prosper. They would pursue their goals by whatever means came to hand—sacred or secular. On the other hand, by 1885 and 1890, neither an insurrection nor calm, good-faith negotiations on land rights and treaty rights were of much use to Indigenous peoples in the Dakotas or Saskatchewan—or, for that matter, for Indigenous peoples in most of the world where room for colonizers was running out. What they needed was a miracle. Negotiation, armed resistance, and miracle would all play their parts.

The Saskatchewan Métis brought Riel back from Montana to lead a secular movement, to petition Ottawa to respect their rights and those of the white settlers. His original value to them was political, as it had been in 1869–70, when he had established a successful Provisional Government in Red River that negotiated Manitoba’s entrance into Confederation as a province and secured land rights (though unfortunately not usable ones) for the Métis. Although Dumont and the others would have heard of Riel’s mental breakdown and institutionalization in 1876 through his cousin Charles Nolin, if no one else, Riel had been largely out of contact even with his own immediate family for most of the period between 1870 and 1883. He had become a schoolteacher in Montana, taken out American citizenship, and entered into territorial politics. The Saskatchewan Métis were
expecting a well-educated politician who was a pious and charismatic Catholic; they could not have been expecting a prophet of a New World Catholicism revitalized almost beyond recognition. Riel's work among the Métis of Montana was pragmatic and political, dealing with such topics as liquor sales and voting rights. It was this pragmatic leader whom the Métis summoned. According to J.M. Bumsted, the North West clergy opposed sending for Riel because "the good fathers were fearful of violence, but they also suspected Riel's prophetic tendencies, which were well-known among the western priests of the Church."¹⁰

For the Anglo-North American settlers, Riel's usefulness was also pragmatic, though it was perhaps conceived more cynically. "From the perspective of the European settlers, Louis Riel could serve either as a catalyst to shake up the dormant politicians of Ottawa, or as the sacrificial martyr/leader of a failed rebellion that had made its point simply by existing. In either case, Riel was totally expendable."¹¹ Even while he was quietly working in Montana, however, Riel had been at work codifying his prophecies, à la The Book of Mormon, into a volume he called "the Massinahican, which in Cree means 'the book,' with particular reference to the Bible."¹² Riel would come back to its major precepts in his diary as he prepared for his death, but they seem to have played little part in his leadership in the North West until sometime after January 1885, when he received word from Ottawa that Macdonald's government was not in any hurry to act on the North West land question or Riel's own claims for recompense for his service to the Provisional Government of Red River or for his losses after he was forced to flee Red River.

Only in the spring of 1885 did Riel change his primary tactic from petitioning the government to forming a provisional government and calling for an armed rebellion in concert with any Indians he could persuade to join him. At this point, he also began to call publicly for a Catholic church that was separate from Rome—and from the missionary priests of the North West, if they did not accept his leadership—and for the creation of a new Métis federation that would welcome French and French-Canadian immigrants, settlers from all the Catholic countries of Europe, European Jews, and Scandinavians, all of whom would join in métissage with the Indigenous peoples of the North West. The most extreme elements of his messianic
calling—renaming the days of the week, the sun and moon, the oceans, and so on—did not re-emerge until after his trial and death sentence. Only after the first military engagement of the campaign, when the Métis under Gabriel Dumont had routed a company of North West Mounted Police and volunteers under the command of Superintendent Lief Crozier at Duck Lake on 26 March, did Riel assume the role of prophet. God, he believed, had sent a sign by delivering Crozier’s men into Dumont’s ambush. Riel prevented Dumont from following up his victory by annihilating Crozier’s retreating column. With God on their side, he may have believed, the Métis did not need to send more souls to perdition. As Stanley asks, “Who would now challenge [Riel’s] claim to be a prophet?” The Exovedate—the governing council plucked from “out of the flock” to be the provisional government of the North West Métis who followed Riel—resolved

that the Canadian half-breed Exovedate acknowledges Louis David Riel as a prophet in the service of Jesus Christ and Son of God and only Redeemer of the world; a prophet at the feet of Mary Immaculate, under the visible and most consoling safeguard of St. Joseph, the beloved patron of the half-breeds—the patron of the universal Church; as a prophet, the humble imitator in many things of St. John the Baptist, the glorious patron of the French Canadians and the French Canadian half-breeds.14

But the priests saw him as mad.

Similarly, Sitting Bull, whom both Standing Rock agent James McLaughlin and the popular press erroneously portrayed as the main Ghost Dance leader among the Lakotas, was noted as a prophet because of, among other things, his accurate prediction of “white men [soldiers] on horse back descending to earth upon the Indian village” before the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Yet, like Riel, he tried politics and diplomacy before prophecy or messianism. Like Riel, he was involved in a battle over land rights—the Métis to have their land claims acknowledged by the government, the Standing Rock Lakotas to avoid being allotted, allotment meaning that each family would have to select the equivalent of a homestead, with the “surplus” land being offered to non-Native newcomers. In 1888, the US government had sent Richard Henry Pratt, the founder of the Carlisle
Indian School, to gain the signatures of three-quarters of the adult men of the tribe, required by the treaty if the Standing Rock Lakotas were to sell any land. Sitting Bull successfully organized the people so that the requisite signatures could not be obtained. Sitting Bull was then part of a delegation that went to Washington at the behest of the government to negotiate another settlement by which the people would lose their land. Sitting Bull agreed to the new terms, trusting the Lakotas to once again withhold the necessary signatures. But in 1889, the Secretary of the Interior sent General George Crook to collect signatures. Agent McLaughlin and the Catholic missionaries pressed men to sign and threatened to cut off annuities and all future payments if they did not. McLaughlin eventually used the Indian police to line up men and move them by a table where each was required to register his X. The measure passed. 16 As with the Métis, patient diplomacy with the federal government had failed. As Riel had taken up his cross, Sitting Bull encouraged the Ghost Dance.

In Saskatchewan in 1885 and in the Dakotas in 1890, there was strong opposition to both the messianic movement and the taking up of arms from within and without the messianic community. The Catholic clergy firmly repudiated Riel, his messianism, and his call to arms. Other Métis settlements do not seem to have supported the uprising, and it is unclear how many of the people even of Batoche and St. Laurent fully supported the Exovedate. Although the white settlers had at first supported Riel as someone who could help them with Ottawa, both they and the English-speaking “half-breeds” or countryborn maintained their neutrality and repudiated any connection with Riel after the violence at Duck Lake. Like the farmers and merchants of northwest Nebraska, the white farmers and merchants of the North West panicked at what they convinced themselves was about to become a large-scale “Indian outbreak”—though some encouraged rumours of war, hoping to make a good profit from supplying the military who would be called in. As Stonechild and Waiser have shown, the “Indian leaders had their own agenda for addressing their grievances and were pinning their hopes on a large intertribal council to be held at Duck Lake that summer [1885].” Although individual hotheads favoured war, there was never widespread Native support for Riel. All the large-scale Indian hostilities in the North West were primarily functions of the
panicked apprehensions of the Euro-Canadians. According to Stonechild and Waiser, Saskatchewan Indian leaders steadfastly refused aid to the Métis, for the most part simply by moving very slowly despite Riel’s increasingly importunate cries for assistance. The “Siege” of Battleford was the Indian Agent’s fearful refusal to meet with Poundmaker’s people, despite their advising him of their intentions and following their usual pattern of approaching the town. The “Battle” of Cut Knife Hill was Colonel Otter’s attack on a camp of families on their own reserve. Even the Euro-Canadian praise of Crowfoot for keeping the Blackfoot Confederacy at peace and in Alberta was misplaced—the Blackfoot had nothing to gain by joining Riel and were far too astute to join a lost cause.

Similarly, among the Lakotas, according to Utley, support for the Ghost Dance varied from less than 10 percent to about 40 percent on the different reservations. Even on Pine Ridge, the reservation with the highest proportion of dancers, where the Lakotas called the inexperienced agent Young-Man-Afraid-of-Indians, where the actual Wounded Knee massacre would take place, fewer than half of the people were dancing, and observers like Santee physician Charles Eastman believed that their intentions were peaceful. The Indian police generally opposed the Ghost Dance and definitely opposed all violence. According to Eastman, when Indian police attempted to arrest an Oglala man accused of cattle theft, Ghost Dancers surrounded police and prisoner, and threatened to burn the agency and take control. American Horse, a “progressive” leader, defused the situation by addressing the crowd:

Stop! Think! What are you going to do? Kill these men of our own race? Then what? Kill all these helpless white men, women and children? And what then? What will these brave words, brave deeds lead to in the end? How long can you hold out? Your country is surrounded with a network of railroads; thousands of white soldiers will be here within three days. What ammunition have you? What provisions? What will become of your families? Think, think, my brothers! This is a child’s madness.

American Horse, like Poundmaker, Piapot, Big Bear, and other leaders who counselled patience, had an irrefutable point. A call to arms was simply
doomed—at least without divine intervention. Even Riel, who pictured part of the divine intervention coming through the combined might of the Métis and all the Indians of the North West, was hoping force would lead to negotiations, not to victory. Thus, he held back Dumont’s men at Duck Lake. The US Army did shoot down the Ghost Dancers at Wounded Knee, even if most of them were unarmed women and children. The desultory guerrilla campaign mounted by a few young Lakota men, including Black Elk, did not have the ammunition and supplies to last for more than a fortnight. While admirers of Gabriel Dumont, such as George Woodcock, have claimed that, were it not for Riel’s messianic pacifism, the war chief of the Métis could have forced concessions from Ottawa by mounting a guerrilla campaign, that is doubtful. As Manfred Mossman writes, “Although guerrilla tactics often brought initial and impressive victories for the rebels [in messianic movements], they merely helped prolong the movements for a limited period of time and raised the overall number of casualties.” True, the Canadian government could not have afforded a protracted campaign, but nor could the malnourished Cree, even had they chosen to join Riel and Dumont, and the sedentary Métis villages would have been easy targets. In addition, the United States would never have allowed a successful guerrilla movement to operate anywhere near its borders. The Gatling gun and gunner that the United States ever so kindly lent to the Canadians to emplace on the steamer Northcote were hints of things to come. Arguably, a guerrilla campaign might have led to the US annexation of the North West, but it is unclear whether that would actually have helped the Métis. The United States would not have been likely to recognize Métis river lot surveys, and the Métis and Indians who did flee to the States did not improve their fortunes.

If the Métis of the North West had stuck to petitions and messianism, they would probably have been left alone. They would also probably have lost their land. Although Thomas Flanagan argues that “it was a story of missed opportunities for reconciliation rather than rebellion provoked by unrelenting oppression,” Gabriel Dumont might not have agreed. Certainly Riel’s messages asking Indian communities to join him and his messages to the North West Mounted Police at Fort Carleton asking for surrender led most Canadian officials to fear an insurrection. Even if, as Don McLean
has suggested, the 1885 “Rebellion” was deliberately fomented by Lawrence
Clarke for the sake of the CPR and by Prince Albert merchants hoping to
profit from a small Métis and Indian war, some threat of violence was nec-
essary to set the troops and volunteers on their way west from Ontario.
Duck Lake was very real violence, but according to Stanley, it was Lawrence
Clarke and the Prince Albert volunteers who dared Crozier to return to
Duck Lake, after a smaller party he had sent to secure stores had met the
Métis and returned unharmed. That the police chose to march again into
Métis territory, where they were vanquished, confirmed the Exovedate’s
belief that Riel was a true prophet, just as the Little Bighorn battle had
confirmed Sitting Bull’s prophecy, but the police action was not the result
of prophecy.

Future Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier, speaking four months after
Riel’s execution, gave what may still be the most accurate apportionment of
responsibility for the North West tragedy:

Rebellion is always an evil, it is always an offence against the positive law
of a nation; it is not always a moral crime.

. . .

What is hateful is not rebellion but the despotism which induces that
rebellion; what is hateful are not rebels but the men who, having the
enjoyment of power, do not discharge the duties of power; they are the
men who, having the power to redress wrongs, refuse to listen to the
petitions that are sent them; they are the men who, when they are asked
for a loaf, give a stone.

The same was probably true for the Lakotas. After all, though the
United States had suppressed most Indigenous religious ceremonies and
organizations and occasionally broke up Ghost Dances in other commu-
nities, it never attempted to arrest Wovoka, unlike Sitting Bull, nor did
the army fire on large groups of Ghost Dancers except at Wounded Knee.
Robert Utley’s judgment is surprisingly similar to Laurier’s:

The dancers at Pine Ridge composed about forty per cent of the
population, at Rosebud thirty per cent . . . These people were belligerent,
suspicious, and excited to the point of irrationality. They expected the white men to interfere with the dance . . . [and] it was only a question of time until another incident . . . ended in bloodshed. By the middle of November the lives of government employees at Pine Ridge, if not at Rosebud, were clearly in danger.

But the conditions that made troops necessary in November could almost certainly have been avoided if Congress had fulfilled its obligations to the Sioux earlier in the year.23

General Miles was even more blunt.

They signed away a valuable portion of their reservation, and it is now occupied by white people, for which they have received nothing. They understood that ample provision would be made for their support; instead, their supplies have been reduced and much of the time they have been living on half and two-thirds rations. Their crops, as well as the crops of white people, for two years have been almost a total failure. The disaffection is widespread, especially among the Sioux, while the Cheyennes have been on the verge of starvation and were forced to commit depredations to sustain life. These facts are beyond question, and the evidence is positive and sustained by thousands of witnesses.24

The greatest difference between Métis and Lakota messianism is in their doctrines and practices. Riel, as we have seen, developed his belief in his mission in the context of Bourget’s ultramontane but specifically French-Canadian nationalism. Even after Riel had been expelled from Parliament and declared an outlaw, Bourget continued to see him, and in 1875, on Bastille Day, he wrote the thirty-year-old Riel a letter that became Riel’s talisman, his sign of his divine mission. According to Stanley, “Riel never parted with this letter. He carried it with him every day, next to his heart, and he placed it at the head of his bed every night.”25 The text itself is relatively unremarkable, the lines that most moved Riel saying simply,

I have the deep conviction that you will receive in this world, and sooner than you think, the reward for all your mental sacrifices, a thousand
times more crushing than the sacrifices of material and visible life. But God who has always led you and assisted you up to the present time, will not abandon you in the darkest hours of your life. For He has given you a mission which you must fulfil in all respects.26

What, exactly, was that God-given mission that Riel must “fulfil in all respects”? Presumably it was the “rejuvenat[ion] of French-Canadian culture, which [Riel’s ultramontane supporters and friends] hoped would take on a new vitality in the young and idealized society of the Great West.”27 Bourget wished his protege well in establishing a western society that was Catholic, French-speaking, and obedient to its priests in all matters, including politics—a replication of the society Bourget had laboured, fairly successfully, to build in Quebec. But Riel, in exile in Washington, DC, his plans on hold until he could be allowed back into Canada, saw something more profound, especially after 6 and 8 December 1875, when he experienced, first in the US Capitol and then in St. Patrick’s Church, something akin to a vision that produced great extremes of joy and sorrow. His host, Edmond Mallet, was becoming increasingly concerned about his sense of mission. “I would tell him that God’s providence worked through natural means, except in very exceptional cases,” Mallet wrote.28 After these visitations, Riel’s behaviour became increasingly unusual. He was passed through a succession of friends and family, none of whom could accommodate his strangeness, until he was finally admitted to first one and then another insane asylum in Quebec.

In some ways, Riel’s behaviour was no stranger than that of various North American messianic prophets from Handsome Lake to Wovoka. He went into an altered state, returned, and began to prophesy. But most Indigenous societies, unlike Mallet, accepted visions, prophecy, and individual revelations from spirits, animals, or the dead as “natural means” of religious revelation and had holy men skilled in working with the visionary to interpret the vision and to make it accessible to all people or to all members of the community. Flanagan suggests that Riel would never have been considered insane had he had his visions in Saskatchewan, but that may discount too easily the power of the clergy and even Riel’s own devotion to authority. The kinds of miracles enshrined in the various grottoes
of Manitoba and the North West celebrate cures, visitations of the Virgin, and other “normal” miracles of the Church—not prophets. Wovoka’s vision, coinciding with an eclipse and apparently enabling him to both predict and control the weather, was accepted among the Paiutes and among the many tribes who sent envoys to the Messiah. While some Christian traditions accept prophesying, speaking in tongues, and other visionary experiences as part of their religion, ultramontane Catholicism, with its complete dependence on the duly constituted hierarchy of the church, was probably the least favourable venue for Riel’s belief that divine revelation could come directly to him. Some scoffers considered Wovoka a fraud and his successes with the weather only convenient coincidences or downright hoaxes (when, for instance, he caused ice to either fall from the sky or float down a river in the middle of July), but for the most part, they did not consider him insane. While some of his enemies considered (and consider) Riel a fraud, many of his friends deemed him insane, the defence his lawyers used unsuccessfully at his trial. For Riel, there was a definite conflict between his personal religious experience and the Catholic ultramontane tradition within which he had to understand, interpret, and act upon his vision and his mission. The difficulty of balancing his sense of mission with his utter poverty and his banishment from Canada certainly left Riel emotionally vulnerable. Given his extremely pious nature and devotion to Bishop Bourget, it is not surprising that “insanity” would be the only way for him to balance the teachings of his faith and his powerful experiences of what William James, in the Swedenborgian tradition, called “vastation.”

Wovoka seems not to have experienced any such conflict. He had a vision. It coincided with an eclipse of the sun, which increased its power in Paiute society. Although the Mason Valley Paiutes were reasonably well off in comparison to the Crees or Assiniboines or Lakotas or even Métis, their way of life was suffering from externally imposed change, including the cutting down of a major food source, the pinyon trees, for fuel and mine supports. Wovoka’s vision of a green world must have been welcome to desert dwellers who were also suffering drought, and Hittman suggests that since he was a wood chopper (Wovoka translates to “cutter”), he may have been making amends for this destruction. The 1870 Paiute Ghost Dance followed epidemics of typhoid, measles, and other diseases, which made...
dancing to bring back the beloved dead extremely appealing. Although Wodziwob, the 1870 prophet, may have become dismayed and stopped dancing when no dead returned, the idea remained. So when Wovoka told the people, once again, to modify the traditional Paiute round dance into a Ghost Dance to bring back their beloved dead, who had continued to die, it was not an outlandish idea—though it was out of the ordinary. Nor did the Ghost Dance seem out of the question to other tribes, particularly to people like the Lakotas, who were losing their families to malnutrition, overcrowding, and the attendant ills. Had French-speaking Catholics from across North America flocked to Riel to learn how they could participate in fulfilling his mission (as they do, for instance, in the annual pilgrimages to Lac Ste. Anne in Alberta), it is likely that he would have been able to bear the disjunction between experience and belief, and thus that he would not have been institutionalized.

Wovoka’s message was also relatively simple. If Indians performed the Ghost Dance faithfully, a New Heavens and New Earth would in some way roll out. White people would disappear, and game and old-time Indians would reappear in a green world of plenty. No violence or threat would accompany this change—it would be surprisingly like Looking Backward, the 1888 bestseller by Edward Bellamy, in that change would appear almost organically. Peace, hard work, tolerance, and honesty—values common to most societies and religions, at least in principle—were the Ghost Dance virtues. Nor was hostility to the whites part of the doctrine. Wovoka had white friends and business partners. Though he was wary of whites who disparaged the Ghost Dance, especially, with reason, after the death of Sitting Bull and the Wounded Knee massacre, he had no objection to their studying or even joining the Ghost Dance. He just did not think—correctly—that many would. Anthropologist James Mooney, whose massive Bureau of Ethnology tome The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890 is still the best text on the movement, had very little trouble persuading Ghost Dancers to let him observe and photograph their ceremonies. Sometimes he was even invited to participate. They translated Ghost Dance songs for him and taught him the tunes. Wovoka willingly granted him a long interview, after he introduced himself as a friend of the Arapaho Ghost Dancers, and gave him paint and other sacred objects to take back to his Arapaho
friends. Even at Pine Ridge, where suspicion of whites ran high, Mooney was excluded from discussion not because he was white but because he had failed to believe. As he describes the conversation,

On one occasion, while endeavoring to break the ice with one of the initiates of the dance, I told him how willingly the Arapaho had given me information and even invited me to join in the dance. “Then,” said he, “don’t you find that the religion of the Ghost dance is better than the religion of the churches?” I could not well say yes, and hesitated for a moment to frame an answer. He noticed it at once and said very deliberately, “Well, then, if you have not learned that you have not learned anything about it,” and refused to continue the conversation.31

That the fearsome Sioux, who had wiped out Custer, had adopted a new dance and that part of its teachings included the belief that in response to devout dancing the Wanekiah (the Messiah) would send a whirlwind to blow away the newcomers and return both the buffalo and the Lakotas’ beloved dead implied to most Euro-American observers that the Lakotas themselves might provide the “whirlwind” in the form of an insurrection. Certainly, not all Lakotas saw the Ghost Dance as purely spiritual. The young men who saw neither a future of achievements ahead of them nor a glorious personal past to cherish and remember were not averse to taking up arms. The main emphasis for the Lakotas, however, does seem to have been primarily spiritual. Lakota language accounts of the ceremony, collected by Catholic priest and Lakota linguist Eugene Buechel, all repeat the experience of dancing, falling into a trance, and seeing beloved kin, especially parents, and the Wanekiah. Ghost Dance songs, although individually composed or given to dancers in a trance, were taught to the entire group, and some that particularly conveyed the ideas of the group or had a catchy tune were frequently sung and taught to other groups. Even among the supposedly belligerent Lakotas, the songs are not vengeful or threatening and do not mention white people at all. Usually they record some action or saying of the beloved dead or a promise by the “father,” the Messiah. One song that might seem to start ominously—“Give me my knife, . . .”—is sung by a ghost grandmother as she prepares to butcher a buffalo and dry strips
of flesh to make wasna, pounded dried meat.\textsuperscript{32} The bullet-proof nature of the Ghost Dance shirts that many of the Lakota men wore seems to be more defensive than offensive. The United States had outlawed the Sun Dance and other ceremonies, and the agents had repeatedly forbidden the Ghost Dance apostles to organize on the Lakota reservations. The dancers wanted to be prepared in case troops sent to break up the dance fired upon them. Unfortunately, the Ghost Dance shirts proved insufficient.

Riel’s message is harder to discern, not least because he was trying to formulate it as his personal world was disintegrating. At the heart of his mission was the formation of a French, Catholic, Métis nation in the West—though he also hoped to include Jews and Scandinavians. Despite his desperate need for Indian allies and the many messages he sent out pleading with various bands to join him (plus the prayers that asked God to send him help from all the Indians of the North West and Montana),\textsuperscript{33} Riel never seems to have realized that the Indians had their own agenda and had no reason to see themselves as any more connected to the Métis, who had been their rivals in hunting the very last herds of the buffalo, than to the white settlers. During his stay in Montana he had written “Memoir on the Indian Question,” in which he wrote, apparently referring to himself,

\begin{quote}
It is perhaps the one who, having enough white blood in his veins, honesty, experience, intelligence enough, would deserve and enjoy the confidence of a good majority of the American people: and who, at the same time, having some Indians amongst his ancestors, would be allowed by public opinion, to say so and to have it known amongst the Indians, as means of getting their confidence; and who, using his influence over them, would show them how to earn their living and would put them to work by all means.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

The “Indians” had an abundance of Euro–North Americans only too eager to “show them how to earn their living” and to “put them to work by all means.” They did not need Riel. A future of Catholic métissage, fused with different nations of European immigrants and settled into farming, was not what anyone was looking for, though the Crees and Blackfoot had insisted on having farming instruction and supplies written into their treaties, and the Dakotas, with fifty years of experience, were among the most
successful farmers in Manitoba and the North West, given their lack of access to sufficient land. Riel believed that North American Indians were all descended from shipwrecked Jews (South American Indians were the descendants of the Egyptian masters on the same ship), and he seems to have had no knowledge of Indigenous religion in general, let alone the prophetic movements, such as the 1870 Ghost Dance, that presaged the Great Plains Ghost Dance of 1890. While the Lakotas would dance to bring about the return of the buffalo to the Great Plains, Riel prayed to his God to “keep wolves, bears, bison and other wild animals away from us.”

Unlike Wovoka, whose ability to direct the weather was acknowledged widely and who acquired disciples throughout the North American West, Riel, like the Lakota Ghost Dancers, found significant opposition from those near him, and his prayers, like the Ghost Dance shirts, failed at holding back the enemy. Bishop Bourget, Riel’s intended Pope of the New World, died at eighty-six, before he could confirm—or more likely condemn—Riel’s actions at Batoche. Riel attempted to recant his “heresies” after his trial, but as his sentence was appealed and affirmed and his hanging date set, postponed, and set again, he turned more and more to establishing a symbolic New Heaven and New Earth. The world he thought he had glimpsed briefly in the spring of 1885 might be beyond his physical grasp, but symbolic renaming and prayer could still, he hoped, bring it about. One of Riel’s significant triumphs in Saskatchewan was in proposing St. Joseph and seeing him named as patron saint of the Métis, thus distinguishing them from French Canadians of European descent who claimed St. Jean Batiste. On 5 September 1884, Bishop Vital Grandin, visiting St. Laurent, named St. Joseph as the patron of a national Métis association and his feast day “a national holiday for people of Indian extraction.” They could inaugurate the new association on 24 September, three months after the fête of St. Jean Batiste. The actual feast of St. Joseph the following year, 19 March, would end the novena Riel had proclaimed at the request of his cousin, Charles Nolin, and foreshadow the hostilities. Renaming, Mossman points out, is characteristic of utopian movements. As he awaited his final date with the hangman, the possibility of founding a Catholic mixed-blood confederation out of reach unless God intervened directly, Riel tried desperately to create a symbolic new future by renaming the heavens and the earth—the sun would
become Jéan, with an accent, the Atlantic Ocean, Saul-Paul, and the other heavenly bodies, continents, oceans, and so on would also bear new names.36

Riel’s Catholic church of the New World may have been a heresy, but it was a recognizable heresy, produced by a particular kind of Catholic, though Flanagan has also proposed extreme Protestant roots in the United States. No one outside of Riel’s community was likely to have envisioned a new papacy to be established first in Montreal and finally on the Red River at St. Vital. The belief that Indians were descendants of lost Jews was certainly not unique to Riel, but the idea that the Métis became both the new chosen people and inheritors of one-seventh of the land of the North West by virtue of their Indian blood was distinctive. (Riel would also claim that the Métis had rights to the land because God never created a people without providing a homeland for them.) The formulae of Riel’s prayers were not only specifically Catholic but referred to various shrines and holy orders associated with his friends and family members. Even Riel’s interest in European settlers seems to have derived specifically from his association with a Catholic colonization operation in Minnesota.37

Beyond the probable influence of Wodziwob and the earlier Paiute Ghost Dance and the traditional Paiute Round Dance, the influences on Wovoka’s messianism are harder to trace. Mooney suggested that the Indian Shakers of the Pacific Northwest may have taught Wovoka some of his techniques. Various commentators have suggested that Mormon doctrine and ceremony may have influenced the Ghost Dance and that the Protestant pietism Jack Wilson learned from his white foster family may have informed the specifically Christian aspects of his teachings. As far as I know, novelist Leslie Silko was the first to tie the Ghost Dance to the apocryphal gnostic writings of first- and second-century Christians that were kept out of the canonized New Testament and only rediscovered in 1945, when an earthenware vessel buried for sixteen hundred years was excavated near Nag Hammadi, Egypt.38 Obviously, Wovoka could have had no access to this esoteric material or even to other gnostic texts excavated in the 1890s. What I suggest, however, is that the similarities indicate that Christianity itself is a variant of many messianic religions that have sprung up in the intersection of a particular kind of cultural conflict and the rise of a prophet. The suppression of the gnostic tradition and its exclusion from
Christian sacred narrative also help explain why both the Ghost Dance and Riel’s prophetic visions were seen as insane, heretical, or potentially murderous by nineteenth-century North American Christians.

Scholars seem to agree that Gnosticism predates and was an important part of early Christianity. Our understanding of Gnosticism has deepened since the discovery and translation of the Nag Hammadi texts; before that, it was primarily known through the writings of its opponents. Birger Pearson lists ten characteristics of Gnosticism, of which the first five are most significant. I quote these at length because they offer, I believe, striking parallels to the Ghost Dance. He observes

first, that adherents of Gnosticism regard *gnosis* (rather than faith, observance of law, etc.) as requisite to salvation. . . . Gnosticism also has, second, a characteristic *theology* according to which there is a transcendent supreme God beyond the god or powers responsible for the world in which we live. Third, a negative, radically dualist stance vis-à-vis the cosmos involves a *cosmology*, according to which the cosmos itself, having been created by an inferior and ignorant power, is a dark prison in which human souls are held captive. Interwoven with its theology and its *cosmology* is, fourth, an *anthropology*, according to which the essential human being is constituted by his/her inner self, a divine spark that originated in the transcendent divine world and, by means of *gnosis*, can be released from the cosmic prison and can return to its heavenly origin. . . . The notion of release from the cosmic prison entails, fifth, an *eschatology*, which applies not only to the salvation of the individual but to the salvation of all the elect, and according to which the material cosmos itself will come to its fated end.39

The Ghost Dancers universally believed that only those who danced would survive the flood, earthquake, landslide, or other catastrophe that would bring back the green world of the beloved dead. The magpie and crow feathers that Wovoka gave or sent to his followers and the crow and eagle feathers that many Ghost Dancers affixed to their dance regalia were intended to lift up the wearer above the catastrophe and into the restored green world. Although it is impossible to generalize about Native
American sacred narrative, it is striking that many creation tales include emergences from successive worlds or the creation of this world from a pre-existing and continuous earlier world. Sometimes the existence of this world, perched on a turtle’s back or hung by cords from the sky, is seen as precarious. If James Walker is correct, during the emergence of the Ghost Dance among the Lakotas, the frame of reference for many people who had been exposed to the constant pressure of agents, schools, and proselytizing Christians was changing from a complex system based on Iyan (Rock) and Skan (Sky) to one of a singular Wakan Tanka, who was more or less equivalent to Jehovah. Iyan and Skan were not necessarily “transcendent and supreme,” but they may have represented a theology of older gods related to the green world rather than the present one of religious persecution and material dispossession. Certainly the present of 1889–90 on the Lakota reservations—in the context of an engulfing Christian, individualistic society—was a “dark prison,” and the human souls of the Lakotas (and other Ghost Dancers) yearned to break free.

The overpowering sense that the green world of the beloved dead was the real one and that the material world was a prison fated to pass away is absolutely central to the Ghost Dance and strongly parallels Gnosticism. The essential human being of the Ghost Dancers was the one who was freed in trances to visit the green world, and would be freed, through the dance, to return to the green world after the catastrophe. The Ghost Dance was to bring the material world of the white men to an end and to reunite the dancers with the pre-existing world of game and the beloved dead.

Not only were the beliefs of the Ghost Dancers similar to those of the Gnostics whose writings were discovered at Nag Hammadi, but so were some of their practices. The Round Dance of the Cross, in which the disciples hold hands and circle around Jesus, singing a hymn to the Father resembles the Ghost Dance and the many Lakota Ghost Dance songs that repeat the line “The Father says so, the Father says so.” According to Pagels, the Round Dance may have served as a sort of “second baptism” for its followers. Gnostic prophets, like the various tribal visitors to Wovoka, travelled around, exhorting others to fast and pray for visions and revelations. Gnostic believers prayed for “this world [to] pass away.” Round dances and fasting for a vision are certainly common religious practices throughout the
world (and perhaps other worlds, for that matter), but they are not usually seen as Christian. Osage scholar George Tinker suggests that Christians might look to Native American religions for a better understanding of early Christianity, before it was codified, Romanized, and, under Constantine, militarized. My point is similar—instead of trying to find specifically Christian elements in the Ghost Dance, it might be useful to focus on universal (a word I usually eschew) human elements in both the Ghost Dance and Christianity—including those mostly purged from official Christianity.

This, of course, raises two issues—why do we find such striking parallels between first- and second-century Gnosticism and the Ghost Dance, and why was this dancing visionary tradition excised from canonical Christianity? Most contemporary people educated in Europe or North America conventionally see the Mediterranean world of the first and second centuries conveniently partitioned into Romans, Christians, Jews, and others, with the Christians being fed to the lions for the entertainment of the Romans. Pagels, however, suggests a far more fluid world that included a great variety of Christians, some of whom identified as Jews and some as Romans, and with many traditions of scripture and prophecy. It was definitely a dangerous world for followers of Jesus of all stripes, and the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem may have made the material world feel as unsettled as the spiritual world. Gnosticism, according to Yamauchi, included non- or pre-Christian Jewish and Egyptian sources, among others, and so, of course, did Christianity in general. According to Pagels, the standardization of a Christianity began with Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, as a defensive movement to unify Christianity against its persecutors and to halt practices—such as women prophesying—that gave it a particularly bad name in the eyes of the Romans. The canonization continued under Athanasius and intensified when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of Rome. Likewise, the Ghost Dance arose in a time of spiritual and material uncertainty, and was repressed both for material reasons and for the ways it differed from canonical Christianity—which was certainly the official religion forced upon American Indians, no matter what the First Amendment promised anyone else.

Captain H.L. Scott of the Seventh Cavalry, and others who interviewed the Ghost Dancers, recognized the similarities of the Ghost Dance
to Christianity. Mooney includes a long section comparing it to everything from the “Biblical Period” to the “Adventists,” including Islam.44 Scott, investigating the Ghost Dance among the southern Arapaho, expected to find the leader a charlatan. Instead, he wrote, “he has given these people a better religion than they ever had before, taught them precepts which if faithfully carried out will bring them into better accord with their white neighbors, and has prepared the way for their final Christianization.”45

While one may cringe at the implication that to be Christian is the only way to be good, at least these observers could tell that feathers and round dances and songs were not always war dances and war paint and war whoops, and certainly not, as Standing Rock’s staunchly Catholic agent McLaughlin described it, “absurd nonsense.”46 Would there have been a different reaction to the Ghost Dance by Christians raised on the Round Dance of the Cross? Perhaps.

Whereas the Ghost Dance resembled the gnostic traditions deliberately excised from the New Testament, Riel came directly out of the most rigid form of canonical Christianity in North America in the nineteenth century—ultramontane French-Canadian Catholicism. His sacred mission could not include prophecy, yet his experience did—a radical disjunctive that quite probably drove him “mad.” If he has an analogue in early Christianity, it is with Irenaeus, who had to balance his own and his teacher’s revelations with his belief that other prophecies, gospels, and interpretations were heresies that endangered true Christianity and its adherents.47 Riel was right, from his point of view, in condemning the priests who opposed him in the North West—they did see his revivalism as a threat to their Christianity. Riel came at the wrong time for his religion. He probably would have been a superb follower for Irenaeus—but not for Bishop Bourget, for whom the questions Riel raised about the true church and chosen people had long been settled and clearly apportioned to Rome and the anointed priests. We miss the religious coherency of the Ghost Dance if we regard it as a hodgepodge dependent upon a learned Christianity for its symbols rather than as a basic human response to demoralizing change, drawing knowledge through many specific Native traditions. We also miss the coherency of Riel’s theology by trying to see it, as he did, in terms of a canon that had no place for prophecy.
Partly because of their bloody immediate failures, we tend to see both the Northwest Resistance and the Lakota Ghost Dance as dramatic tragedies enacted as Anglo-Saxon Manifest Destiny rolled across the continent. The Ghost Dance shirts did not repel bullets. Sitting Bull was killed by the Indian police, some of whom perished with him. Approximately three hundred people, including women and children chased for miles by soldiers, were killed at Wounded Knee. The most often quoted lines from Black Elk Speaks—completely unlike, we should note, anything that Black Elk ever said—express this tragedy of unmitigated defeat: “And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people’s dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.”48 Similarly, Riel’s dream is supposed to have died on the scaffold in 1885, after he was absolved from his sins by Father Alexis André, the missionary priest who had most strongly opposed his prophecy and his rebellion. Less often mentioned are the eight Indian men who were hanged a week later than Riel—the Crees Miserable Man, Bad Arrow, Round the Sky, Wandering Spirit, Iron Body, and Little Bear, and the Assiniboines Itka and Man Without Blood—and the leaders Poundmaker, Big Bear, and One Arrow, as well as the other men who died of their imprisonment at Stoney Mountain Penitentiary.49

Yet despite these appalling tragedies, they were not the end of the story. The big winners were clearly the national governments in both countries, and those who paid the highest price for the Ghost Dance and Northwest Resistance were the Lakotas, Crees, and Assiniboines. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald benefited so greatly from the Northwest Resistance that it is easy to be persuaded by the theories of McLean and Sprague that he deliberately fomented it.50 It is no mere figure of speech to say that if Riel had not existed, Macdonald would have had to invent him, just as official Washington would have had to invent Custer. Certainly, Macdonald and the Indian Department and Interior Department bureaucracy laid the groundwork for anger among the Indians by refusing to honour the famine clauses of Treaty 6, especially during the starving winter of 1883–84; by cutting back on Indian rations generally; and by tolerating the misdeeds of individual agents, farm instructors, and civilians. Similarly, trouble with the Métis was fed by the slowness or downright refusal of
response. Macdonald was almost certainly right that a transcontinental railway was necessary to hold Canada together as a country—one can even make a case for the National Policy as a whole. But the cost—especially to the Indians, who were positively harmed by the railway—was high. The money saved on treaty obligations was poured into the Canadian Pacific Railway, and yet it was on the verge of bankruptcy by the time of Duck Lake. Only its use to speed Middleton’s men west to quell an “insurrection” proved its indispensability and attracted the capital necessary to stave off bankruptcy and to finish the project. As Collingwood Schreiber, the government’s engineer-in-chief, wrote to Charles Tupper in England, “The House and country are both in favour of the CPR and that should now be doubly the case when the fact is patent to the world [that] but for the rapid construction . . . Canada would have been involved in a frightful waste of blood and treasure quelling the rising in the North West.” Had the Canadian Pacific Railway gone bankrupt before its completion in the spring of 1885, Confederation itself might have failed. Saskatchewan settlement would have slowed down, and Canada as we know it would never have existed. Given the expansionist tendencies of the United States, however, it is unlikely that that would have provided any long-term gain for the Métis.

Another advantage to Macdonald from Riel’s taking up of arms was the opportunity the “Rebellion” gave the Canadian government to include all the Indians of the North West as rebels and renegades, at least potentially. This provided Ottawa with an excuse to abrogate treaties, to continue to cut Indian Affairs budgets, and to fasten increasingly galling Indian Act restrictions—quite outside the treaties—on the Crees, especially. The imprisonment and subsequent deaths of Poundmaker and Big Bear, important Cree leaders, completely doomed their plan of a confederacy and rights in keeping with the treaties. Even so, there was no people’s dream trampled in the mud for the Crees, Assiniboines, and Dakotas. Their survival and persistence, particularly their ability to retain language and culture despite concerted efforts to assimilate individuals and break up families and communities, shows their remarkable resilience.

By the end of 1885, however, Macdonald must have been very satisfied. The CPR was both solvent and complete. The North West was at least superficially at peace. With British Columbia and the Prairies firmly
tied by rail to Central Canada and no threat of an insurrection to tempt American troops to defend their own borders, the spectre of annexation that had haunted Macdonald since his young manhood in Kingston was finally dead. The government’s abrogation of the famine clause of the treaties during the unbearable starving winter of 1883–84 was erased from the national consciousness—after all, the Indians who had starved were prospective murderers, and retrospectively deserved to die. Euro-Canadians had already developed an immunity to the spectre of starvation among Native peoples, reassuring themselves that Native lives were “brutish and short” and that it was “natural” for them to starve—an implicit part of the justification for the conquest and “civilization” of Indigenous peoples by imperial powers worldwide. Fur trade wife Letitia Hargraves had off-handedly remarked, nearly forty years earlier, that “no disaster has happened in the Northern Department this season . . . the Indians are starving in every direction and of course the dividends will be small.” Even in the twentieth century, Helen Anne English, the matron of a small Cree school run by her missionary husband, would calmly note in her diary after visiting a sick family, “Nothing very much the matter with any of them, just starving.”

If Macdonald won the jackpot and the Crees, Assiniboines, and Dakotas paid the price, what about the Métis? Only Riel was hanged. Most of the other Métis convicted of crimes against the government were imprisoned briefly and released. As Diane Payment has written, “Contrary to all studies on Batoche to date, which focus almost exclusively on the destructive impact of the ‘North West Rebellion,’ there was no final destruction nor dispersal of the local population, although commercial activities were interrupted and some were people [transposition sic] inevitably displaced in 1885.” The Métis continued to live successfully in the Batoche area for at least a generation after 1885, and their leaders played important roles in territorial politics. If we see Riel’s messianism as a typical revitalization movement, it worked reasonably well for the Métis. St. Joseph and the flag are important symbols of Métis identity Canada-wide. The Métis are officially recognized as an Aboriginal people of Canada, along with First Nations and Inuit. In the United States, there are Indians with white grandpas and white folk with Indian grandmas, but there is no recognized and self-identified mixed-blood culture, in strong contradistinction to Canada.
Although the nature of the fur trade in Canada was different enough from that in the United States to account for part of this distinction, the nation-building ideals of Riel and the traditions and symbols resulting from the two movements identified with him are undoubtedly a strong source of Métis cultural persistence.

In the United States, one can discern a similar pattern of wins and losses—overall, the cavalry won and the Indians (at least the Lakotas) lost. But this is not entirely the case. Black Elk ended his “speaking” to John Neihardt not with the lugubrious plaint about the people’s dream dying in the bloody mud of Wounded Knee but with a brief statement of the armed resistance he and the other young men mounted, and finally with the blunt and optimistic statement “Two years later I was married.” Russell Thornton has argued that the Ghost Dance was “about” population decline. The 1890 Ghost Dance coincided with the nadir of North American Indigenous population. People wanted the dead to return because they were running out of the living. Although, as Alice Kehoe points out, the census figures upon which Thornton relies are hazy, Thornton argues plausibly that those groups who Ghost Danced enjoyed larger population increases than those who did not, and Kehoe herself has traced the value of the Ghost Dance for confirming cultural and group identity among the Dakotas in Canada. Despite the Wounded Knee massacre and the death of Sitting Bull, not to mention assimilation pressures, poverty, isolation, and a host of related social ills, the Lakotas have experienced population increase since 1890, and they even revived the Ghost Dance in conjunction with the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee. For Ghost Dance tribes not involved in the massacre, the positive benefits were even higher. For the Pawnees, Kehoe states, the Ghost Dance allowed dancers to meet with medicine practitioners who had died before passing on their songs and ceremonies. Thus, the Pawnees literally recovered their traditional liturgies and activities from the dead. Riel was also concerned with demographic revitalization, though it was to come from immigration and intermarriage rather than from the recovery of the existing population. The European settlers and métissage he dreamed of never happened, so to this extent, his movement did fail. Wovoka, meanwhile, grew to a comfortable old age, supporting himself mostly by selling Ghost Dance regalia to the faithful, usually by mail order.
He was recognized as a prophet by most of his Paiute community. Both the Métis and the Ghost Dance societies received from their revitalization movements significant spiritual and demographic benefits with relatively minor material losses, except for the Lakotas—a result that is even more striking in comparison to the Crees, who had no revitalization movement and lost many of their best leaders.

If American Indians lost less in the suppression of the Ghost Dance than Canadian Indians lost in the suppression of the Northwest Resistance, the US government gained less than the Canadian government. If there was an individual winner, it was not the president, but Standing Rock agent James McLaughlin. McLaughlin had long been looking for an excuse to have Sitting Bull arrested and imprisoned, especially after Sitting Bull’s fight against the sale of “surplus” lands. The Ghost Dance gave him an excuse, and in the event, the old chief was shot and killed by the Indian police. Despite the ensuing carnage and casualties among both the Indian police and Sitting Bull’s followers, McLaughlin no longer had a rival for power on Standing Rock. Benjamin Harrison, an uninspiring president who, ironically, had gained a foothold in politics because he was the grandson of William Henry Harrison, “Old Tippecanoe,” who had won the White House through his Indian-fighting prowess, had no particular need for an Indian war. Fourteen years before Wounded Knee, Custer’s Last Stand had furnished Washington with an excuse to abrogate treaties and hunt down Indians. In many ways, the fact that Sitting Bull was back in the United States and on a reservation showed that Washington no longer considered him a person of interest. Custer’s old regiment, the Seventh Cavalry, was the outfit that fired at Wounded Knee, gaining revenge for lost comrades (whom few of the 1890 soldiers had known), several Congressional Medals of Honor, and some rebukes for having killed so many women and children so far from the actual armed beginning of the action. The merchants and hay farmers of northwest Nebraska, like those of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, benefited from the troops stationed in their vicinity, as was the case in virtually all Indian Wars in North America, but Gordon and Rushville and Prince Albert erupted in no major booms.

Both the 1885 Northwest Resistance and the 1890 Lakota Ghost Dance were messianic revitalization movements that arose from the
combination of altered material circumstances and the availability of a prophet. Both attracted military intervention resulting in substantial loss of life. Paradoxically, the Northwest Resistance justified the completion of the CPR and solidified Canada as a nation. More darkly, it “justified” the suppression of the Crees, Assiniboines, and Dakotas, and even of the Blackfoot Confederacy, none of whose members had taken up arms. Riel’s messianism, except for the naming of St. Joseph as patron saint of the Métis, vanished with him, but the two uprisings named for him did revitalize and cement Métis identity in Canada. And like the Holocaust for the Jews, Wounded Knee has become a symbol of “Never Again” for American Indians. Even for Ghost Dance participants like Black Elk, who eventually discarded the Ghost Dance for Catholicism and then subordinated Catholicism to return to his own Great Vision, the Ghost Dance served as a revitalizing force in circumstances that might otherwise have led to despair. Like Christianity, Riel’s messianism and the Ghost Dance both gave courage to individuals to rebel against political and religious oppression and served as a powerful group identity for a living community.