In Hindsight: Half a Century of Research Discoveries in Canadian History

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Episode 11: Will Jackson, Later Honoré Jaxon

The middle-aged visitor from Chicago was now twice the age he had been at the time of his first residence in the Canadian West in the mid-1880s. Will Jackson, now known as Honoré Jaxon, had changed physically, with a receding hairline, graying hair and added pounds to his small, once lean frame. But his political principles, his commitment to the exploited and the oppressed remained unaltered. The man who had served as Louis Riel's secretary had come back to the northern Plains after 22 years to record the Métis and First Nations versions of the troubles of 1885. Riel's secretary found the Canadian Northwest in 1907 completely transformed. During his absence, hundreds of thousands of European and American immigrants had come to the Canadian prairies, increasing the population over 1000%. In 1905, the federal government had created two new provinces, Saskatchewan and Alberta, a political change that pleased him greatly. As early as 1884, he had called for provincial status for the North-West Territories.

In 1882, Will Jackson, a former University of Toronto student, had moved west to join his parents at Prince Albert, North-West Territories. Six years earlier, in 1876, the Canadian government

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had signed Treaty Six with the First Nations, covering the huge area that is now known as central Saskatchewan and Alberta. The North-West Territories in the early 1880s had a population of about 20,000 First Nations, 5,000 Métis, and a small number of non-Indigenous settlers (only 25,000 as late as 1885), concentrated at three points along the North Saskatchewan River: Edmonton, Prince Albert and, in between, Battleford.

Will Jackson was raised in Wingham, Huron County, Ontario, about 150 kilometres northwest of Toronto where his father operated a general store. The young Protestant attended high school at neighbouring Clinton, just south of Wingham, before entering the Classics program at the University of Toronto. He finished three years of study in Toronto (which in 1881 had a population of about 200,000, four times as large as the entire North-West Territories) before his father's bankruptcy prevented him from completing his final year. In 1882, he followed his family west to Prince Albert, where his father opened a farm implements business, and later farmed east of the town. Will had been brought up and encouraged by his Methodist (now the United Church of Canada) parents to work for a better world. In England, both his maternal and paternal grandfathers had been Methodist ministers.

Shortly after his arrival in Prince Albert district, the local farmers' union, formed by Eastern Canadian settlers and local English-speaking Métis, selected him to serve as their secretary. The settlers badly needed this well-educated university man to help them obtain self-government and end the direct rule of Ottawa. The intense-looking young man with a booming voice soon became a familiar sight riding on horseback to meetings in and around Prince Albert. With great energy, the young idealist attacked the Macdonald government's harsh land regulations and its maladministration of the North-West. He advocated an alliance of the farmers' union with the French-speaking Métis at

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neighbouring Batoche. Concerned to retain the rightful title to their lands in the South Saskatchewan River Valley, 50 kilometres to the southwest of Prince Albert, the Métis had invited Louis Riel, their champion in the Red River in 1869/70, back from the United States.

Will Jackson saw justice in the Métis cause and volunteered to serve as Riel's secretary in 1884/85. In his eyes the Plains Métis were the modern descendants of the ancient Greeks and the Romans of the Republic, whose intense love of freedom he so admired. With him he brought his copy of Plato's *Republic*. Will's goal was to see the non-Indigenous and the Indigenous Peoples co-operate together.

His vision differed substantially from that of John A. Macdonald. Tragically, Macdonald chose the course that Canada followed. To tell Will Jackson's story as Riel's secretary in 1884/85 suggests that the relationship of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples was not predetermined by fate. Things might have been different.

In late 1884, Will journeyed to the neighbouring farms around Prince Albert in all kinds of weather to gather signatures for the petition which asked for justice from Ottawa. He dispatched it to Ottawa at the end the year. Alas, no response, as Saskatchewan historian Bill Waiser has written, "the department of Interior should have been called the department of Indifference" (*History Matters 2. More Stories from Saskatchewan* (2019), page 147).

During the early months of 1885, the young man passed through a period of intense political—and religious—excitement, as Ottawa failed to respond. Violence between the Métis and the Canadian government broke out in late March. Emotionally overwhelmed, the young English Canadian had a nervous breakdown. On 12 May, Canadian troops captured Batoche. They seized and imprisoned him, although he had never advocated armed resistance or fought in any battle. He was held in a Prince Albert jail cell with

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five Métis, under conditions of filth and squalor. At some point, he would have learned that José Ouellette, the elderly grandfather of his Métis girlfriend, Rose Ouellette, was one of those who had died defending Batoche in the final Canadian assault.

The prisoner, who now chose to wear a Métis headband, was sent to Regina by wagon chained to One Arrow, a Cree chief, who also had been taken into custody. As Will's great-grandniece, Elizabeth Macleod Simpson, wrote in *The Reluctant Pioneer* (2019), her historical novel printed for family and friends that follows her ancestors' journey from eastern to western Canada, Will was traumatised by his experience at the hands of his own people. The Canadian response was draconian. As Waiser points out in *A World We Have Lost: Saskatchewan Before 1905* (2016, page 561), "There was no Cree equivalent for words such as conspiracy, traitor, or rebellion." One Arrow was found guilty and sentenced to three years in the Manitoba penitentiary, even though not one prosecution witness reported that the elderly chief had taken up arms. At his trial, the Willow Cree leader had found the proceedings incomprehensible, especially when the treason-felony indictment was translated into Cree as "knocking off the Queen's bonnet and stabbing her in the behind with the sword."

Will's great-grandniece, Elizabeth ("Betty") Macleod Simpson, grew up with her family's stories of his treatment. Her grandmother, Cecily Jackson Plaxton, knew him in Ontario, briefly in Saskatchewan, and had remained in correspondence with him all her life. Her grandmother and Betty's aunt, Cecily Plaxton Jr., had visited him for two weeks in New York City in the summer of 1947 (outlined on page 189 of my book *Honoré*, 2007). The following year Betty left the Plaxton family homestead near Prince Albert and began her teaching career in Hanna, Alberta, where she met her husband, Bill. The Simpsons were blessed with five children. In her Prologue to *The Reluctant Pioneer*, entitled "1885:

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Prince Albert, The Territories," Betty creatively imagined how her ancestor felt in mid-May.

> *Treason. William Jackson's mind reeled like a child's spinning top, the colors blurred, the spinning becoming a wobble.*
>
> *Treason. Accused by the Government of Canada. How was this possible? He had never fired a shot in anger; never carried a firearm; never been involved in espionage; never written letters of sedition.*

The Regina court in July committed the young English Canadian idealist, who had become a Catholic in the Métis camp, and who had later accepted Louis Riel as the prophet of a reformed Christian church, to the lunatic asylum at Lower Fort Garry. At the institution north of Winnipeg, Jackson wrote this assessment of Riel: "The oppression of the aboriginal has been the crying sin of the white race in America and they have at last found a voice." He spoke with a vision modern for his times.

In early November 1885, Will Jackson slipped away from his host institution and crossed into the United States. The Toronto *Globe* on page 1 on 17 November printed a dispatch from Winnipeg. The headline read, "Jackson's Escape. Riel's Ex-Secretary Sends a Letter to His Sister. His Message to Sir John." It urged his sister Cicely, then studying in Winnipeg, to send the following telegram to the prime minister: "If you hang Riel you will provoke a more dangerous and atrocious outbreak. He is the sole mouthpiece of the aborigines and must be heard. Let him free, and I am willing to be shot in his place." The hanging of Louis Riel occurred 16 November, the day before the article on "Riel's Ex-Secretary" appeared.

As any non-Indigenous Canadian who self-declared as a Métis derived no advantage whatsoever in the mid-1880s, why did he do

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so? Riel's execution led Will to renounce his race. In Chicago, where he now decided to make his home, he now self-identified as a Métis and changed his name to the French-sounding Honoré Jaxon. He devoted the remainder of his life to fighting for the working class and the Indigenous peoples of North America. During his first months in Chicago, Will helped the carpenters' union in their fight for an eight-hour working day. Among other protests in 1894, he joined Coxey's Army, a march of the unemployed on Washington, D.C. Spiritually he accepted the Baha'i faith, the new world religion from Persia which stressed the simplicity of life and service to others. He liked especially the faith's emphasis on the need to abolish the extremes of wealth and poverty.

At the age of 40, Jaxon married for the first time. His partner was Aimée Montfort, an attractive Chicago schoolteacher, six years younger, also active in the Baha'i community. Several years later, she left teaching and switched to office work, usually in the business correspondence field in which she excelled. Aimée loved to read, especially the works of Shakespeare, so much so that she once took a course on his plays at the University of Chicago. A reading of Shakespeare's works, she argued, enriched an individual "in a real way, to prepare one for meeting and understanding crises that do come into everyone's life" (*Honoré*, page 104). Aimée read deeply. In the early 1920s, she made this penetrating commentary on H.G. Wells' over 800 pages long *The Outline of History*, a chronicle of the history of the world from the earth's origin to the First World War. She wrote, "It presents the whole field of history, broadly, logically, fully, and in most fascinating style. It offers the most magnificent survey of civilization in the making and is an education in history finer and larger than that to be obtained from any other source" (*Honoré*, page 105).

Honoré's wife had a wide social circle. She responded well to new ideas and kept informed of contemporary social issues. On one

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occasion, she helped, in her husband's words, "a millionaire lady friend of ours in North Side Society" to put on a "benefit" for a maternity hospital for unmarried young women. With great pride Honoré commented in a 1906 letter, "It is a sadly needed institution and a fitting climax to Aimée's many good works in this wicked city." In addition to her participation in Baha'i organizations, she belonged to the Women's Civic Club, a statewide group that fought for the vote for women. A friend of the Jaxons in neighbouring Oak Park was a young American architect, later renowned as world-famous for his own style of residential construction, his Prairie style: Frank Lloyd Wright. He and his wife Caroline enjoyed their company. In December 1910, the Jaxons had an enjoyable dinner with the Wrights and their six children. Later Aimée recorded what Frank said that evening about her husband. In her words, "He was much interested in Honoré's recital of events & said he wished he had the money to back Honoré, to give him complete freedom to follow any trail he chose & sit back & watch Honoré play the game. He says he can't imagine a livelier, more interesting play. And he's right" (*Honoré*, page 142).

Honoré's progressive, and enlightened, ideas about the equal position of women in society pleased Aimée a great deal. She thought the world of her husband. As she wrote in 1911, "He is not only abreast of most modern thought but in the front rank with the most radical. He is just the most splendid chap & and I am very proud of him." Yet, she recognized one personal shortcoming, his refusal to make money for himself: "To me, monetary reward for legitimate effort, is both interesting & attractive; to him it seems to be the repellant element" (*Honoré*, page 141).

In 1907 and 1908, the Jaxons made an extended visit to Western Canada to see Honoré's family in Saskatchewan, to speak to audiences of Western working men and farmers about society's injustices, and to gather notes for a history he planned to write on

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the troubles of 1885. Honoré and Aimée travelled in the summer of 1908 in a prairie schooner, or pioneer's covered wagon, and lived in a teepee of his own design. In his talks in urban areas, he argued that workers needed a living wage; that the resource-rich Crown lands belonged to the people of the West and should not be divided up by an eastern government; and above all that western farmers and labourers should strive for "fair play" for the Indigenous Peoples, whose economic state was even lower than that of hard-pressed non-Indigenous workers.

Jean Riel, the son of Louis Riel who then lived in the Winnipeg area, encouraged his father's former secretary "to write the history of the North West Rebellion of 1885, because you were an eye witness, and you can tell the truth." (My translation from the French text cited in Montreal's *La Presse*, 22 février 1912, which reads: "Je vous prie d'écrire l'histoire de la rébellion de 1885, au Nord Ouest, parce que vous ayez été témoin occulaire et que vous pourrez dire la verité." See *Honoré*, page 127, endnote page 259.) To the Métis, Honoré was a *revenant*, someone who had come back to them out of their distant past. In Regina Tom Molloy, the President of the city's Trades and Labour Council, years later still remembered his visits with Honoré in his hotel room. Often, he found his friend scribbling away on a small table. All around him lay papers covered with handwriting and rough sketches of the battlefields of 1885. The Jaxons returned to Chicago in late 1908 with their luggage full of information collected for his manuscript on the events of 1885.

In Chicago Honoré was active in the Chicago Federation of Labor and worked as an editorial writer on their monthly publication, the *Union Labor Advocate*. Years later Lloyd Lewis, a journalist and historian, recalled what Otto McFeeley, labour editor of the *Chicago Evening Post* at the turn of the century, had said about the extraordinary Honoré Jaxon. McFeeley spoke of him as "very learned and very cultured." Although the police and middle-class

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Chicagoans might dismiss him as a crank, “the intelligentsia, the bankers, the college professors and the labor union men they knew he was worth listening to, for he could not only talk classic English with an Indian eloquence but he has an immense amount of learning” *(Honoré,* page 139).

Honoré became the advocate of many progressive causes in Chicago, until the end of the First World War when he moved to New York. Unwilling to endure his spartan living accommodations, Aimée did not follow. Quite early in their relationship she realized the impact of the troubles of 1885 on her husband. “That period made a changed man of him and accounts for much in him that is odd but which I have accepted because I understood the reasons and causes back of all” (*Honoré*, page 105). She died in the early 1930s.

Honoré loved New York with its legendary museums and its libraries, “with every facility to help gain knowledge on every subject in the universe.” Yet he remained the alert social critic. “On the surface it looks as if the poor had so great a chance as the rich to acquire knowledge,” but in reality, “since the hours these are open from about 9 or 10 a.m. to 4 or 5 p.m. only the leisured class can take advantage of them” (*Honoré*, page 189). In the 1940s, his life mission became the establishment of a library for the First Nations in Saskatchewan. In 1884 and 1885, over half a century earlier, he had met Big Bear and other important First Nation leaders. He felt drawn to this straightforward people and bought old books and pamphlets and saved old newspapers, whatever he considered important, and stored them in his basement apartment. If only he could transport his library to Western Canada, the Indigenous Peoples could use it to educate themselves. His dream died on 12 December 1951, when his landlord evicted the frail 90-year-old tenant on the grounds that he could no longer do his janitorial duties to earn his lodgings. The landlord also claimed that his paper mountain constituted a fire hazard. Honoré’s

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library, three tons of it, went first to the street, and next to the New York City dump.

The 13 December 1951 *New York Daily News* photo, taken the previous day, shows Honoré Jaxon, a white-bearded old man wearing a wide-brimmed black hat, with an army blanket draped around him. He sits totally bewildered in front of a mountain of stuffed carton boxes and bundled newspapers; a pile six feet high, ten feet deep and 35 feet long. The 90-year-old had just been evicted from his janitorial job and basement lodgings. In the days to follow, his "archives" were dispersed. Undoubtedly, his treasured archives ended up in the New York City dump. Heart-broken Honoré died 10 January 1952. The *New York Herald-Tribune* reported that he had served in 1885 "as aide to Louis Riehl" (as the *Tribune* spelled his name), and that "Riehl was his hero."

The Back Story

I first learned of "Louis Riel's secretary" and his last days in New York City in the early 1970s while preparing for my comprehensive PhD examinations in Canadian history at the University of Toronto. In George F.G. Stanley's biography, *Louis Riel* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1963), the standard work on Riel, I read endnote 66 on page 414 about Will Jackson. It provided this intriguing detail about his final days and death in New York City in early 1952: "In later years he called himself Honore Joseph Jaxon. He worked as a labor organizer in the US and died in poverty in New York." The date is easy to recall as I recorded it, winter of 1971/72, in the frontispiece of my copy of Stanley's *Riel*, now part of my Honoré Jaxon collection in the University of Saskatchewan Library, Special Collections. In July 1979, I was most fortunate to meet his niece in Prince Albert, the late Cicely Plaxton (1895-1981), who encouraged me to write a

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biography of her beloved uncle. I dedicated *Honoré* (Regina: Coteau, 2007) to her. On closing the publishing firm in 2020, Coteau made a most generous gesture. They gave their production files for their books to their respective authors. Using Coteau's production files, the University of Toronto Press plans to bring out a second edition of *Honoré* in the fall of 2023.

For his support over several decades with my Canadian historical research, I am most grateful to the late George F.G. Stanley (1907-2002), the distinguished Canadian historian. In my files, I have a copy of my letter of 20 November 1968 to him, written from the Université Laval about the history of the Indigenous Peoples in what is now Canada: "Please allow me to sincerely thank you for your two-page letter which I received last week. The letter threw a most realistic light on my plans for next year."

Back in 1980 the Web, of course, did not exist. After my meeting with Cicely Plaxton, the daughter of Honoré's sister Cicely Jackson Plaxton, the previous year, I wrote countless letters in search of additional information about this unusual and remarkable individual who saw justice in the cause of the Indigenous Peoples, and the working class. On 1 February 1980 I contacted the leading New York City dailies: "I wonder if by any chance you have any articles on, or photos of, Honore Joseph Jaxon (1861-1952), who lived in New York from the early 1920's to 1952." A little over two weeks later I received a letter, sent by regular mail. Joseph McCarthy, the *Daily News* Librarian, reported that the paper had no clipping file on Jaxon, but "there are (4) photos in our picture files, which may be purchased from Photo Sales Dept." What a thrill to see the *Daily News* shots of Honoré. In 2007, 27 years later, I selected the best of the four images as the cover of my biography. The featured image for this episode on Honoré is the cover of my book, used on the flyer for my Saskatchewan book tour in 2007.

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Will's great-grandniece, Elizabeth Macleod Simpson, has written and self-published *The Reluctant Pioneer* (2019), a historical novel printed for family and friends, that follows the Jackson family's journey from eastern to western Canada. With her permission the University of Saskatchewan Library, Special Collections, has accepted and placed a copy of her well-written novel with their manuscript holdings on Will Jackson / Honoré Jaxon.

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