



LOUIS RIEL AND THE NORTH-WEST REBELLION

An introduction on the events and issues of Louis Riel's life

Called a prophet, statesman, scoundrel, saint, traitor, martyr, visionary, and madman, Louis Riel is one of the most controversial figures in Canadian history. All of these descriptions, and many more, have been earned by a man who continues to haunt Canadian history more than a century after his execution. And it is easy to understand why. For sixteen years, from 1869 to 1885, Riel was the political, if not spiritual, leader of the Métis and their struggle to secure a place in western Canadian society. His activities eventually culminated in the 1885 North-West Rebellion, an event that shook the young dominion to its foundations and raised serious questions about the place of minority peoples. Some would argue that Riel's quest has yet to be realized.

Born at Red River (present-day Winnipeg) in 1844, Louis Riel led a successful resistance in 1869-70 that stalled the unilateral Canadian takeover of the region. But before Riel could assume his rightful place as Manitoba's father of confederation, he was forced by a vengeful Canadian government to flee to the United States. After a decade-long odyssey, including election to the House of Commons and a spell in two Québec insane asylums, Riel settled with his family in Montana as a school teacher. This exile came to an abrupt end in 1884, when he was invited by the Métis of the Saskatchewan country to take up their cause.

Throughout the early 1880s, the Métis of the South Branch communities (along the South Saskatchewan River between present-day Dundurn and Prince Albert) had been trying to get Ottawa to formally recognize their traditional river-lot holdings before development engulfed the region. When the federal government repeatedly failed to respond to their petitions, the Métis turned to Riel, the hero of the successful Red River Resistance. But the man who answered the call of his people in 1884 was fundamentally different from the man of Red River days.

Bibliography preparation

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Although still a charismatic leader, Riel now regarded himself as God's personal emissary, whose mission was to create a homeland in the North-West for the Métis and other oppressed peoples of the world in preparation for the final day of judgment. To strengthen his negotiating position, Riel tried during the summer and fall of 1884 to bring about an Indian-Métis alliance. But the Cree leaders, Big Bear and Poundmaker in particular, had their own strategy for dealing with an intransigent federal government, a strategy that did not include a resort to arms. Undeterred, on March 19, 1885, Riel formed a provisional government at Batoche in order to wring concessions from Ottawa — by force, if necessary. One week later, the Métis clashed with the North-West Mounted Police on Beaudry's Reserve near Duck Lake.

When news of the Duck Lake Battle reached Ottawa, the Canadian government raised a large military force to isolate and put down what it regarded as an Indian-Métis insurrection. Riel decided to make his stand at Batoche, a strategy that ultimately sealed the fate of the Métis and lost any chance of prolonging the conflict. The North-West Field Force, momentarily stunned by an ambush at Fish Creek in late April 1885, swooped down on Batoche on May 9 and easily overran the defenders three days later. The next six weeks were largely anticlimactic, as Indian leaders and their followers who had been implicated in the troubles surrendered to Canadian authorities.

Riel appeared in a Regina courtroom on July 20 charged with high treason. Guided by the hand of God, Riel had surrendered after the fall of Batoche in the naive hope that he could use his trial as a platform for his cause. Although his lawyers claimed that their client was insane, the Métis leader's eloquent closing address to the jury was not that of a madman. He was found guilty and sentenced to death. Despite a recommendation for mercy, several appeals, and continuing questions about his mental fitness, Riel was hanged at Regina on November 16; his body lies today in the cathedral cemetery in St. Boniface, Manitoba.

Ottawa's decision to let the execution proceed did not end Riel's role in Canadian national life. Not only do students of history continue to debate the cause of the rebellion, but Riel himself has come to serve as a symbol for various issues or groups — whether it be racial tolerance, western regional protest, Aboriginal rights, or minority interests. His name, meanwhile, continues to evoke a wide range of images and emotions — many of which, unfortunately, obscure or confuse Riel's purpose and the grievances of the Métis. Despite decades of research by three generations of scholars, Louis Riel and the North-West remain a complicated event in Canadian history. 🍁

READING LIST

Beal, Bob and Rod Macleod.

Prairie Fire: The 1885 North-West Rebellion. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1984.

Drawing heavily upon a number of previously neglected sources, *Prairie Fire* demonstrates that the 1885 uprising represented a wider discontent and disillusionment in western Canada; in other words, it tries to get away from the tendency to focus almost exclusively on Riel and events at Batoche. *Prairie Fire* describes how Indians and white settlers, in addition to the Métis, had serious grievances that were ignored by a distant federal government; recounts the events of the rebellion in considerable detail; and finally, provides a fine, penetrating analysis of the trials of the rebels. The story is told in a lucid, fast-paced prose, interspersed with excerpts from diary accounts and newspapers. In fact, the abrupt shift in focus from chapter to chapter reinforces the authors' argument that the rebellion has all the characteristics of a prairie fire.

Bowsfield, Hartwell.

Louis Riel: Rebel of the Western Frontier or Victim of Politics and Prejudice, parts iv to vi.

Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969.

Although somewhat dated, Bowsfield's reader on Louis Riel provides a good introduction to the historical debate over Riel's role in the rebellion, his subsequent trial, and his legacy. It is suggested, for example, that the federal government's neglect of western Canada was perhaps just as important a cause of the rebellion as Riel's antics. The section on the Métis leader's trial also contains several contemporary and current assessments of Riel's mental condition. But the reader should be wary of the conclusions in the last section, "Public and Political Reaction," especially the out-dated idea that the death of Riel marked the death of the Conservative party in Québec.

Cameron, W.B.

The War Trail of Big Bear. London: Duckworth, 1926.

W.B. Cameron, a Hudson's Bay Company clerk, was the only white man to escape death at the Frog Lake settlement on the morning of April 2, 1885. *The War Trail of Big Bear* is Cameron's autobiographical account of the rebellion in the Fort Pitt area, based largely on his days as a captive in war chief Wandering Spirit's camp. Cameron's story is important for its perspective — that of an Indian hostage. It also serves to confirm that Big Bear was no longer in control of his band. But *The War Trail of Big Bear* must be read with caution for it reflects many of the prejudices and stereotypes about Aboriginal peoples at the time.

Dumont, Gabriel.

Gabriel Dumont Speaks. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1993. (translated by Michael Barnholden)

In 1903, Gabriel Dumont dictated his own account of the rebellion to a small group of friends in one of the local Métis homes in the Batoche district. Although Dumont's version was recorded eighteen years after the troubles, he spoke with an authority and determination to ensure that the Métis side of the story was told; he was apparently troubled by the official version. *Gabriel Dumont Speaks* is a translated version of the Dumont transcript (held by the Manitoba Archives) and provides an absorbing, first-hand account of the events by one of the major players, Riel's adjutant general.

Dunn, Jack.

The Alberta Field Force of 1885. Calgary: Jack Dunn Publisher, 1994.

Although Major General Middleton wanted to concentrate his army's energies on Batoche, he was forced to send separate relief parties to forts Battleford and Edmonton following the early April 1885 news of the Frog Lake murders. *The Alberta Field Force* examines the activities of the military column, under the command of the eccentric General Strange, that marched from Calgary north to Edmonton and then east along the North Saskatchewan River to the Fort Pitt district. Dunn describes some of the lesser known aspects of the rebellion, such as the Battle of Frenchman's Butte, the Loon Lake skirmish, and the pursuit of Big Bear. He also provides insight into the paranoia that gripped Alberta during the spring of 1885.

Flanagan, Thomas.

Louis "David" Riel: "Prophet of the New World". Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979.

In *Louis "David" Riel*, political scientist Thomas Flanagan seeks to explain the Métis leader's seemingly bizarre behaviour, particularly in the aftermath of the 1869-70 Red River Resistance. Through a careful re-reading of Riel's writings, Flanagan argues that Riel was more a religious prophet than a political leader and that he deliberately pushed the Métis toward open rebellion in 1885 in order to fulfil his chosen role as God's personal emissary. Flanagan's work is important, for it suggests that Riel was not a madman; rather, his radical religious ideas were in keeping with other messianic leaders and millenarian movements.

Friesen, Gerald.

The Canadian Prairies: A History, chapters 6-10. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984.

Recognized by the Canadian Historical Association as the best book in Canadian history in 1984 (the John A. Macdonald prize), *The Canadian Prairies* contends that the North-West Rebellion was a "tragedy." What started as a peaceful protest resulted in a five-million-dollar war, thanks to a mixture of government neglect and parsimony and Riel's dogged determination to serve as prophet to his people. Friesen's treatment of the rebellion is noteworthy, for its perceptive discussion of Riel's role. It bluntly asserts that there was no

Cree military movement in 1885, and acknowledges that the Métis communities continued to thrive after a period of dislocation and adjustment following the rebellion.

Giraud, Marcel.

Le métis canadien, [reissued in 1986 in two volumes as *The Métis in the Canadian West*]. Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie, 1945.

One of the most exhaustive studies of the Métis at the time of its publication at the end of World War Two, *Le métis canadien* examines the mixed-blood populations of western Canada from an ethnographic perspective. Giraud's conclusions are suspect, if not disturbing, and must be read in light of the prevailing attitudes and prejudices at the time. Successful Métis communities, according to Giraud, abandoned their wandering ways and adopted a more sedentary, agriculturally-based (ie. European) lifestyle. Those that refused to "evolve", such as the Batoche Métis, dispersed in the aftermath of the rebellion.

Hildebrandt, Walter.

The Battle of Batoche: British Small Warfare and the Entrenched Métis. Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1985.

The Battle of Batoche analyses the Canadian army's assault on the Métis stronghold at Batoche during the climatic four-day period from May 9-12, 1885. Through the use of "sequential manoeuvre" maps and contemporary photographs, Hildebrandt demonstrates how the Métis forces effectively won the first day of the battle and how the North-West Field Force overran Batoche a few days later only after a carefully orchestrated feinting action fell apart. *The Battle of Batoche* also provides the first detailed analysis of the strategy and tactics of the two sides during the fateful engagement. In particular, Hildebrandt explains why the Métis under Riel chose to make their stand at Batoche, instead of harassing the advancing Canadian troops, and why Major General Middleton, despite his numerical strength and superior weaponry, advanced on the Métis capital with great caution.

Light, Douglas W.

Footprints in the Dust. Battleford: Turner Warwick, 1987.

Footprints in the Dust is a deceptively rich account of the rebellion from the perspective of Fort Battleford, Saskatchewan, the former capital of the North-West Territories. Doug Light, a descendant of one of the first members of North-West Mounted Police, lived and breathed the rebellion while growing up in Battleford and met several of the last surviving participants in the event. *Footprints in the Dust* provides a day-by-day description of events in the North Saskatchewan country for the period, January 9 to November 27. It also offers several important insights into the rebellion — perhaps, one of the most important being that many of the mixed-blood families in the region had relatives on both sides of the conflict. The appendices lists the names of those men who fought in the rebellion.

Martel, Gilles.

Le messianisme de Louis Riel. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1984.

Gilles Martel's assessment of Louis Riel is based on the theory that people in crisis will turn to messianic leaders. Simply put, the Saskatchewan Métis were experiencing profound change and Riel's religious message offered hope and guidance. *Le messianisme de Louis Riel*, however, fails to consider two important facts: that some of the Métis were ready and willing to engage in the new economy taking shape in western Canada, and that a great majority of the mixed-blood residents of the South Saskatchewan country chose not to support Riel at Batoche. It is not clear, moreover, whether Riel's most ardent disciples actually understood his messianic message or simply followed him because of his earlier success during the Red River Resistance.

Miller, J.R.

Skycrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada, chapter 10, ("The Northwest Rebellion of 1885"). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989.

In this engaging, insightful history of Indian-white relations in Canada, Miller examines the 1885 rebellion from three distinct perspectives: Louis Riel, the South Branch Métis, and the First Nations. He suggests that Riel sought to re-enact the success of the 1869-70 Red River Resistance and that he alone provoked the rebellion in order to force Ottawa to negotiate with his Métis provisional government. He also questions the prevailing notion of a First Nations-Métis alliance, by noting that there were lingering tensions between the various western tribes, that any Indian violence was limited and localized, and that the majority of bands did not participate.

Morton, Desmond, editor. The Queen v Louis Riel: Canada's Greatest State Trial. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974.

Few other court cases in late-nineteenth century Canada were followed as closely by the public as Louis Riel's trial for high treason in July 1885. Riel had surrendered after the fall of Batoche in the expectation that his state trial would serve as a platform for his cause. But the Canadian government, determined to limit the political fallout from the rebellion, decided to try the Métis leader in a small Regina courtroom before a territorial magistrate and a jury of six. *The Queen v Louis Riel* reproduces the complete transcript of Riel's trial. Although his own lawyers tried to have him acquitted on the grounds of insanity, Riel publicly refuted the plea because it would have called into disrepute his actions on behalf of his people.

Mulvaney, C.P.

The History of the North-West Rebellion of 1885. Toronto: A.H. Hovey and Company, 1885.

Published within months of the last gunshot in the struggle, Mulvaney's history of the rebellion is the story of Canada coming of age. The rebel "half-breeds" and their "savage"

Indian allies, according to the author, had threatened the great future of the country, and it fell to the North-West Field Force to crush the enemy and restore peace and order to western frontier. *The North-West Rebellion* draws extensively on the available military records of the campaign, newspaper reports, and first-hand accounts of soldiers in the field. It is a story of victors and the vanquished, complete with sketches, maps, troops lists (including the killed and the wounded), and even songs and poetry.

Payment, Diane.

Les gens libre — Otipemisiwak, Batoche, Saskatchewan, 1870-1930. Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1990.

Public historian Diane Payment has spent the better part of her professional career examining community life of the South Branch Métis, in particular those living at Batoche. In *Les gens libre*, Payment suggests that the Métis moved into their new “homeland” in increasing numbers in the 1870s, determined to regroup and maintain their distinctive traditions and customs. This did not mean, however, that the Métis clung steadfastly to the glory days of the buffalo hunt and refused to adapt to new circumstances. Payment’s Batoche is a relatively prosperous, structured society. It is also a Batoche where most Métis refused to support the rebellion or did so under duress; and it is a Batoche that did not disintegrate after 1885 but persisted into the early 20th century.

Siggins, Maggie.

Riel: A Life of Revolution, part 4. Toronto: Harper Collins, 1994.

Maggie Siggins’ *Riel* is a misunderstood, revolutionary leader, who turned his back on a promising career to work tirelessly for the betterment of his people. It is an entertaining story, that sets out to uncover the human side of Riel and all his foibles, but at the same time, do justice to his cause and place in history. What emerges could best be characterized as “great man” history. Riel was unique in his ability to straddle both cultures — the white and Aboriginal worlds. His attempt to bring about a workable relationship between the two, especially given the institutionalized racism of the period, must be admired. Sadly, according to Siggins, this side of Riel is not understood today, let alone appreciated.

Silver, A.I.

The French-Canadian Idea of Confederation, 1864-1900, chapter viii. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982.

Silver’s study of the “Riel affair” serves as an excellent example of how Riel and the Métis were used as symbols for other issues by other groups. Ontario proponents of one national language and one national culture portrayed Riel as a French-speaking, Roman Catholic traitor who deserved his fate. Québec nationalists, on the other hand, embraced Riel as their own — a champion of minority French and Catholic rights outside Québec; indeed, they

argued that his treatment at the hands of the federal government underscored their vulnerability in confederation. Unfortunately, both interpretations had nothing to do with Riel's purpose or the grievances of the Métis.

Sprague, D.N.

Canada and the Métis, 1869-1885, chapter 10. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1988.

Canada and the Métis contends that the Canadian government did not simply ignore Métis grievances, but was willing to promote or generate conflict with the Métis for political purposes. Sprague argues that Prime Minister John A. Macdonald was kept well informed of the Métis unrest in Saskatchewan in the early 1880s and that he was far from oblivious to the situation in western Canada as is sometimes suggested. In fact, *Canada and the Métis* suggests that the prime minister originally decided to pursue a policy of conciliation, but then decided to deliberately provoke Riel in order to rescue the yet uncompleted Canadian Pacific Railway. Macdonald evidently reasoned, according to Sprague, that the Métis would back down in the face of a strong show of force and that the railway would receive the much needed financial assistance for getting troops quickly to the region.

Stanley, G.F.G.

The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions, part two. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936.

One of the first studies to examine the central role of the Métis in 19th century western Canadian history, *The Birth of Western Canada* is widely regarded today as the classic work on Louis Riel and the North-West Rebellion. In trying to make sense of the rebellion at Red River in 1869-70 and later in Saskatchewan in 1885, Stanley attributed the troubles to “the problem of the frontier, namely the clash between primitive and civilized peoples.” This interpretation not only reduced Riel to a leader of a “people who did not want to be civilized,” but suggested that all mixed-blood peoples — in fact, all Aboriginal peoples — were essentially the same. *The Birth of Western Canada* contends that the people of the “frontier” were bewildered and frustrated by the events overtaking them and were unable to change or adjust to new circumstances.

Stonechild, Blair and Bill Waiser.

Loyal till Death: Indians and the North-West Rebellion. Calgary: Fifth House Publishers, 1997.

Loyal till Death is the first comprehensive examination of the Indian role in the 1885 North-West Rebellion. Based on oral history and traditional documentary sources, the book argues that the First Nations of western Canada had their own strategies for dealing with their situation in the 1880s and that these strategies did not include open rebellion. It also explains why some individuals or groups resisted in 1885, and equally important why a majority of the bands chose not to participate in the troubles. In particular, it examines the events of 1885

from the First Nations perspective and demonstrates that Indian involvement was isolated and sporadic, and not part of a grand alliance with the Métis. Finally, *Loyal till Death* describes how the Canadian government deliberately portrayed the Indians as rebels in order to justify a number of restrictive and repressive measures in the aftermath of the rebellion.

Wiebe, Rudy and Bob Beal, editors.

War in the West: Voices of the 1885 Rebellion. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985.

War in the West is an excellent resource book for capturing some of the intensity and passion of the rebellion. Lavishly illustrated with contemporary photographs and sketches, the book tells the story of the rebellion through the words of some of the participants — from both sides of the struggle. Organized in diary format for each day of the rebellion, Wiebe and Beal have included a rich sampling of first-hand accounts from soldiers, settlers, merchants, and reporters to Métis, Indians, and hostages. The identity of each person is briefly outlined, while each event or incident is placed in context. This is oral history at its best.

Woodcock, George.

Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and his Lost World. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1975.

This biography of Gabriel Dumont portrays the great hunter and his fellow Métis as one of the last self-regulating communities in the emerging industrialized world of the late nineteenth century. They were a kind of utopian society organized around the buffalo hunt. Woodcock also provides an answer for one of the most debated questions about the rebellion — namely, why Dumont accepted Riel's decision to wait for the advancing Canadian army at Batoche even though he disagreed with the strategy. Woodcock maintains that Dumont was not only steadfastly loyal, but that he also believed Riel had the power to influence events.

WEB SITES RELATED TO LOUIS RIEL

<http://library.usask.ca/northwest/contents.html>

excellent summary of important events surrounding the Northwest Resistance plus digitized images of important players and scenes.

<http://library.usask.ca/northwest/index/title/476.html>

an analysis of Riel's poetry for its political and religious beliefs.

<http://www.dlcwest.com/~acfc/Historique/Hommesmetis/riel/ptitre.htm>

a brief summary in French of the important periods of Riel's life.

<http://www.wwlia.org/cahi1872.htm>

explanation of events surrounding the election of Riel to Parliament and his subsequent banishment from it.

<http://library.usask.ca/northwest/index/subject/400.html>

an additional list of references, annotated bibliography, and original writings of Riel.

<http://library.usask.ca/northwest/index/subject/174.html>

bibliographic index by subtopics related to Riel's life.

<http://www.nmarcom.com/heritage/minutes/min22.htm>

brief summary in both languages of the life of Riel and events of the Rebellion.

<http://www.nfb.ca/FMT/F/MSN/02/2155.html>

eight-minute French-language film on Riel. 