

FLAGS OF THE MÉTIS

Calvin Racette

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Cover Illustration — On June 19, 1816 a contingent of Métis with colors flying, led by Cuthbert Grant met and defeated a force led by Governor Robert Semple. This historic battle, called Seven Oaks, took place within present day Winnipeg. It is said that on this day, Métis nationalism was born.

Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Racette, Calvin, 1952-

Flags of the Métis

Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-920915-18-3

1. Flags — Canada, Western — History. 2. Red River Rebellion, 1869-1870 — Flags. 3. Riel Rebellion, 1885 — Flags. 4. Métis — Canada, Western — Heraldry. * 5. Métis — Canada, Western — History. * I. Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research. II. Title.

FC129 F4R32 1987 971.2'00497 C87-098130-7
E99.M693R32 1987

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CHAPTER ONE

The First Flag

At the turn of the 19th century a great rivalry existed in Canada. The competition for furs and trading territories between the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company was fierce.

The Hudson's Bay Company was established in 1670. Charles II granted the Company a charter which gave them exclusive rights to all the land that drained into Hudson Bay. This immense territory, named after Charles' cousin, was named Rupert's Land. This new company, based in London, England, began an intense competition with France for the beaver trade. The struggle for dominance ended in 1763 with the military defeat of France on the Plains of Abraham, and for the next few years the Hudson's Bay Company was to enjoy relative prosperity.

In 1798 a group of Scottish merchants living in Montreal established the North West Company. The purpose of this new company was to compete for control of the fur industry. They re-established many of the previously abandoned French posts in the Athabasca region, leading to bitter competition between the two companies.

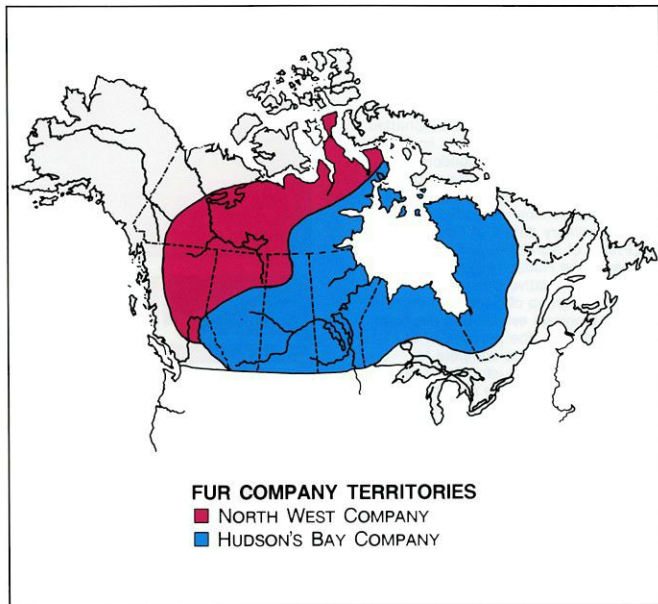


Indian and Métis trappers now had two markets for their furs; they were therefore able to negotiate better prices for their winter's catch. But the companies would extend credit to the trappers for each upcoming winter season — so much credit that many trappers became indebted to the companies for amounts which far exceeded the income they might receive for the winter's catch of furs. This, plus the fact that rum was freely supplied as a credit item, was to cause serious problems.

The aggressive actions of the fur trading companies led to a conflict which became known as the Fur Trade Wars. Employees of each company would attack the posts of the other; they would threaten and rob individual trappers in order to frighten them into trading only with their own company. Sometimes they would convince trappers not to honor their debts with the opposing company, hoping that this would cause the trappers to switch sides. Lord Selkirk, one of the major shareholders in the Hudson's Bay Company wrote:

The ferocious spirit which had been fostered among the Clerks and Servants of the North West Company by six years of continual violence, during the opposition, was all turned against the Hudson's Bay Company, and there is reason to believe not only that a systematic plan was formed for driving

their traders out of all the valuable beaver countries, but that hopes were entertained of reducing that Company to so low an ebb, that the North West Company might buy up their Charter, and thus obtain an undisputed monopoly of the trade, fortified by a legal title.¹



By 1810 the North West Company appeared to be winning the fur trade war. The quantity of furs coming out of the Athabasca region far exceeded that of Rupert's Land. Attempts by the Hudson's Bay Company to gain an equal footing in the industry led them to infiltrate their rivals' territory. This increased the tempo of the conflict. The Hudson's Bay Company accused its rival of drastic overtrapping, saying that at least one beaver should be left alive in each lodge to allow the species to reproduce.

From 1812 to 1815 a new strategy was employed by Lord Selkirk. Approximately two hundred settlers were recruited from Scotland and moved to Canada. They were to take up farms in an area which Selkirk had acquired, named Assiniboia, better known as the Selkirk Settlement. These settlers were located in a strategic place which successfully cut in two the North West Company trade route.

The Selkirk Settlement was on the Red River, which drained southward, and was therefore not part of Rupert's Land. But it soon became apparent that the placement of settlers in this area would not go unchallenged by the North West Company.

Lord Selkirk is treated by historians as being a philanthropist, with the goal of making a better life for his countrymen. They did not entertain the idea

that, as a major shareholder in the Hudson's Bay Company, Selkirk might have had ulterior motives: to benefit himself and the Company. Fully aware that the North West Company would react against the settlers, Selkirk placed them in the center of the opposition's trade route. Actions taken against the settlers would justify bringing a large peace-keeping force to the area to protect the settlers — and also to protect Selkirk's and the Company's interests.

Many Métis were employed by the North West Company as traders and clerks. Four of these clerks were given the task of discouraging Hudson's Bay Company trade in the Athabasca Region. John Pritchard, a former partner of the North West Company turned colonist, describes these clerks "as the sons of retired North West Company partners"² This was a reference to Cuthbert Grant, William Shaw, Nicholas Montour and Bostonias Pangman.

The area that was occupied by the Selkirk Settlers came under the jurisdiction of Cuthbert Grant. He began to take steps to discourage the settlers.



Cuthbert Grant, 1796-1854

Photo credit: Saskatchewan Archives Board

Many of the settlers felt that they had been misled by the HBC, that they had been abandoned without sufficient assistance. These were glad to leave the area and go to Upper Canada. The majority chose to stay, hoping they could retain their meager holdings. Grant and his Métis followers harassed the settlers by chasing the buffalo away when the settlers went out to hunt, and turning horses loose in the settlers' crops.

In 1814 Governor Miles MacDonnell issued a proclamation in an effort to ensure that the settlers and the expected immigrants would have an adequate food supply. It read in part:

*In the yet uncultivated state of the Country, the ordinary resources derived from the Buffaloe and other wild animals hunted within the Territory, are not deemed more than adequate for the requisite supply. Wherefore it is hereby ordered that no persons trading furs or Provisions within the Territory for the Honorable H.B.Co., the N.W.Co. or any individual or unconcerned Traders or persons whatever shall take out any Provisions, either of Flesh, Fish, Game, or Vegetables procured or raised within the said Territory by water or land carriage for one twelve month from the date hereof save and except what may be judged necessary for the trading parties at the present time within the Territory to carry them to their respective destinations and who may on due application to me obtain a license for the same.*³

Later in the same year, Governor MacDonnell issued another proclamation which made it illegal to hunt buffalo from horseback. These two proclamations incensed the Métis, who earned their livelihood by trading with the fur companies and by hunting buffalo from horseback.

The North West Company were quick to condemn the actions of the governor. Alexander MacDonnell, an agent of the North West Company and the cousin of the governor, promoted the Métis and endorsed the harassment of the settlers. He told the Métis that the settlers had come to take over the land which rightfully belonged to them, the New Nation, or *bois-brûlés*. Alexander MacDonnell rewarded the Métis for actions against the settlers, giving them pistols, swords, uniforms and a flag. The flag was described by Peter Fidler in his journal: "The flag of the half-breeds is about four and one half feet square, red, and in the middle a large figure of Eight horizontally of a different colour."⁴

Giving gifts to the Indians and Métis was a common practice of the fur trading companies. These gifts were usually articles of clothing or tobacco. From the perspective of the North West Company, the acceptance of these gifts by the Métis assured the company that the Métis were the company's personal military force that could be called into operation at any time. The presence of this force gave the Montreal-based company a great deal of control in the area. This show of control and military strength is outlined by James Sutherland:

*Alexander MacDonnell partner of the N.W.Co. arrived with a great parade of 40 or 50 Canadians, Freemen and Half-Breeds forming two distinct companies. MacDonnell led one of these consisting of Canadians with colours flying. The other Company were Half Breeds headed by Cuthbert Grant, a Half Breed who has been regularly educated at Canada and has acted for several years as Clerk, and still continues to act as such, to the N.W.Co.. This Tribe had another flag hoisted of what Nation I know not, it is red with a figure of 8 placed horizontally in the middle of it and is said to be a present from the N.W.Co. along with some Swords and a few pairs of Pistols.*⁵

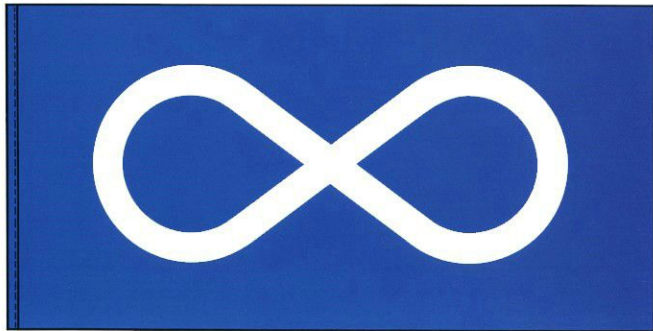
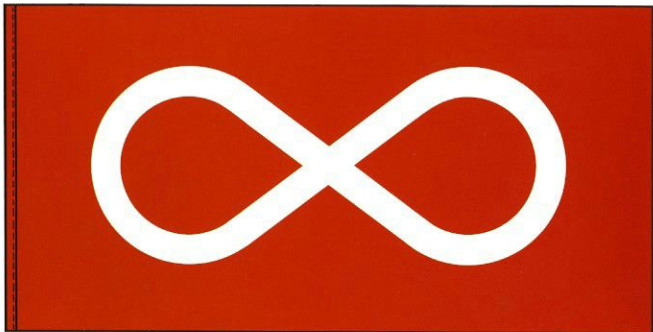


In 1812, with the arrival of the Selkirk settlers, a new dimension was added to the fur trade wars. The North West Company presented a flag, as a gift to the Métis in their employ. It became the assigned duty of the Métis employees to harass the settlers in an effort to discourage farming in the area.

The power of this military force became evident with the defeat of Governor Semple at Seven Oaks. This gave rise to another situation that had not been expected: Métis nationalism was beginning to grow. The Métis viewed themselves as a military force with their own identity and decision-making powers. A new nation had emerged which flew its own flag, and had strong leadership and its own form of government. Cuthbert Grant was chosen leader of the Métis through a democratic system based on consensus.

In an article published in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, Gwain Hamilton wrote: "This flag seems to have been merely a trial, perhaps just a feeler put out by someone trying to design a flag that would attract the Métis.... The only two things consistent about these two flags was the 'figure eight.' If it had any significance no historian seems to have recorded it." ⁶

Many Métis people today disagree with this statement. The blue background is derived from the alliance with the North West Company, who used blue as a main color rather than the red of the Hudson's Bay Company. The horizontal eight is an infinity sign, which has two meanings: the joining of two cultures, and existence of a people forever. The infinity symbol has also emerged in the traditional dances of the Métis. The quadrille, in which the dancers move in a figure eight pattern, is a perfect example.



This flag was to have both positive and negative implications for the Métis people. It served as a unifying symbol which sparked the roots of nationalism. It also became a common denominator for a group of people who had similar goals and aspirations. On the other hand, the flag had a detrimental effect on the Métis as a political force because it was used against them after the incident at Seven Oaks.

The two fur trade companies had realized that competition was, in the long term, hazardous to profit and success. Plans for a merger were discussed as early as 1810. These plans were well formulated by 1816, but the merger did not occur until 1821. By that time, the fur companies were able to shift the blame for the incident at Seven Oaks from themselves to the Métis. This was done by using the uniforms and flag given to the Métis to identify the Métis as a strong military force with an identity separate from the fur companies.

In a letter to Lord Selkirk, Governor MacDonnell outlined the position of the Hudson's Bay Company: "Our infant Colony has met with a hard stroke but I firmly trust it will yet ride triumphantly over the neck of its enemies. We could now I think, be justified in forcibly

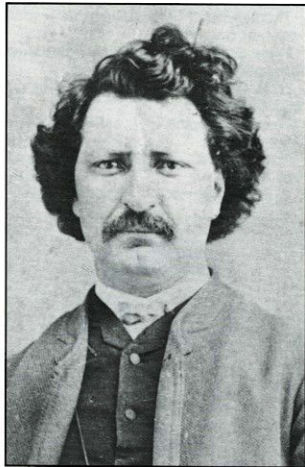
turning out the N.W.Co. whenever we are strong enough to do so."⁷ In the fall of 1816, Selkirk wrote to Sir John Sherbrooke, "In consequence of the information which I had obtained, I could have no hesitation as to the propriety of stopping the dispatch of these supplies: the district for which they were destined, being in fact in a state of open rebellion. It is occupied (to the exclusion of all His Majesty's peaceable Subjects) by a Banditti, who avow their determination to set the laws of their Country at defiance, acting under the regular command of the same leaders, and at their head, a partner of the N.W.Co. (Mr. Alexr. MacDonnell) who is proved by most distinct evidence to have been the author and instigator of the massacre of 19th June."⁸ These two letters show that the fur companies were involved in a bitter struggle for control of the Red River area.

Having identified the Métis as a strong and independent military force, the companies were able to blame the Seven Oaks incident on the Métis, who were then the only people ever taken to trial for violent actions in the fur trade wars. Because the fur trade companies controlled the courts in Upper Canada and Montreal, their non-Native employees were never prosecuted for major crimes. Commissioner Coltman's investigation into the fur trade wars revealed that the North West Company used Grant and the Métis to pursue their own endeavors. The flag became a device used to identify the Métis for the purpose of prosecution.



CHAPTER TWO

FLAGS OF 1869-70



Louis Riel, ca. 1873

Photo credit: Manitoba Archives

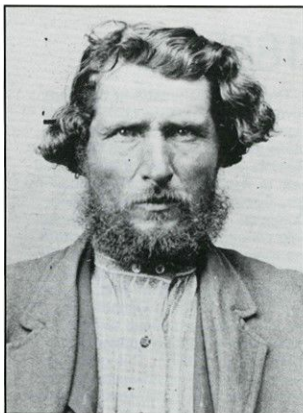
The political situation of the Red River area at the time of Canadian Confederation once again brought Métis nationalism to the surface. Rumors were rampant of a proposed sale of Rupert's Land by the Hudson's Bay Company to the newly formed Dominion of Canada. This proposed sale caused a great deal of concern to the residents of Red River, who wondered what effect this would have on individual ownership of land. A group recently arrived from Canada, headed by John Schultz, caused turmoil because of its strong support for Canadian expansion. This group also had a great fear of American annexation of the Red River area. Annexation was supported by the Irish Fenians who had a presence there.

There were approximately 12,000 residents in Red River. This included about 6,000 French-speaking Métis, 4,000 English-speaking Métis, 1,500 non-Natives and 500 Indians. These people were all experiencing a great deal of economic hardship. The buffalo had disappeared from the area, fish and game were scarce, drought and grasshopper infestation were ruining the crops.

Louis Riel, who had returned to Red River in 1868, emerged as the political leader of the Métis people. He began to organize the residents in an effort to have some political input and decision-making authority regarding the changes that were coming to the area. The residents feared a large influx of Canadian settlers before their own land rights could be guaranteed.

Dr. Schultz, leader of the Canadian party that had recently arrived, owned the local newspaper. He wrote contemptuous articles about the Métis and published articles in support of Canadian expansion. A survey crew headed by John Snow had arrived at Red River in the fall of 1868. They began to survey the area into parcels of land, which would enable the government to sell them to immigrant settlers. Prime Minister Macdonald appointed William McDougall as Lieutenant Governor of the North West Territories in the fall of 1869 to expedite this plan. More survey crews arrived and began to divide the land into one mile squares, completely ignoring the riverlot system that had been established by the residents.

The sale of Rupert's Land had not been finalized, and the fact that surveyors were in the area prior to the completion of the sale prompted the Red River residents to take action. Under the leadership of Riel they set out to guarantee their religious, cultural, language and land rights. On October 11, 1869, Riel led a party of eighteen unarmed Métis who confronted the surveyors and stopped them from continuing their work by standing on the survey chains. A few days later, the Métis formed a National Committee. The Committee drafted a letter to the Lieutenant Governor refusing him entry into the Territory. McDougall ignored this letter, leading the Métis to take action. An armed guard led by Ambroise Lepine confronted and escorted the Lieutenant Governor out of the territory. Another force of 120 men led by Riel occupied Fort Garry without any opposition.



Ambroise Lepine, 1884

Photo credit: Glenbow Archives

On November 16, 1869, Riel proposed that the National Committee form a provisional government. They met again on December 8, 1869, and with the support of the French-speaking Métis, Riel formed a provisional government. According to international law, a provisional government could be established in the absence of a permanent government.

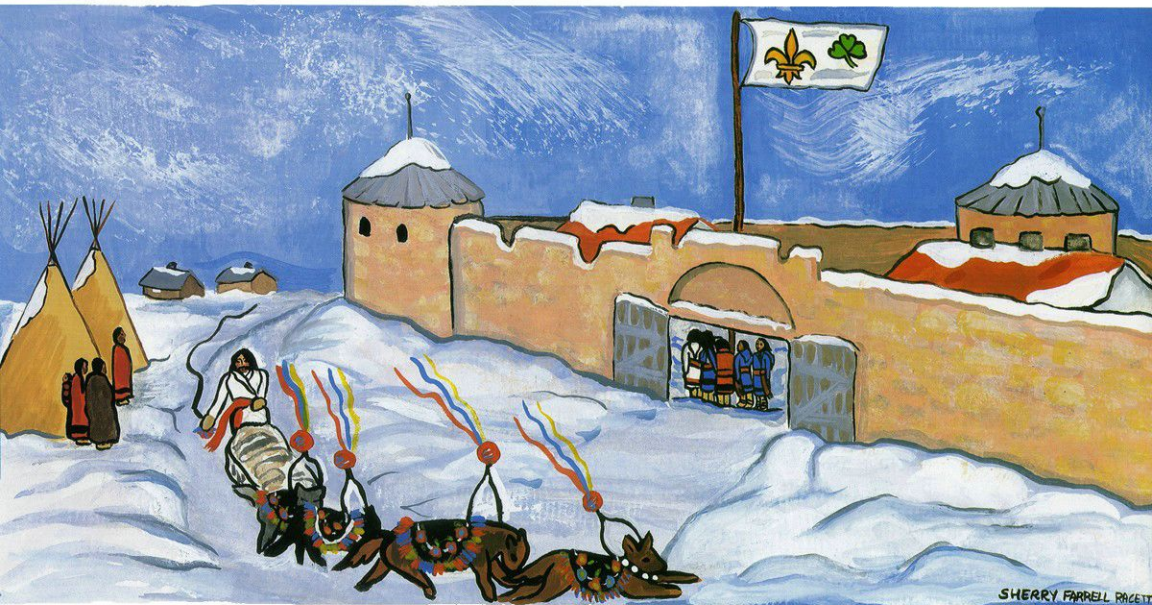
The list of officers for the provisional government were:

President	
Louis Riel	French-Métis
Secretary	
Thomas Bunn	English Fur Trader
Assistant Secretary	
Louis Schmidt	English Half-breed
Treasurer	
W. B. O'Donoghue	U.S. Citizen
Adjutant-General	
Ambroise Lepine	French-Métis
Chief Justice	
James Ross	English Half-breed
Postmaster	Hudson's
A. G. Bannatyne	Bay Employee ¹



Louis Schmidt, Riel's school chum and life long friend, 1874

Photo credit: Manitoba Archives



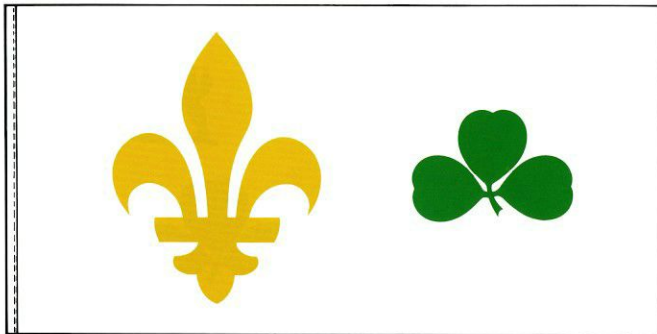
On Dec. 10, 1869, Louis Riel assembled a party of Red River residents in the courtyard of Fort Garry. It was on this day the newly formed provisional government raised its flag and demanded their rights as loyal citizens of the Crown. These demands were made to the newly formed Dominion of Canada who had guaranteed the rights of Canadian citizens under the British North America Act.

Alexander Begg, a storekeeper and historian in the Red River Settlement, described the raising of the flag by the provisional government on December 10, 1869. He wrote:

On Friday last the 10th instant the French went through the ceremony of hoisting the flag of their Provisional Government. About four o'clock in the afternoon a number of armed men assembled in the court yard of Fort Garry and were addressed by Mr. Riel who called upon them to support the new flag until their rights as free born subjects of Queen Victoria were respected. The idea of this movement is

simply another step towards the grand scheme of a Provisional Government, an emblem as it were of its actual existence. After Mr. Riel's address, the flag (the design of which is the fleur de lis and shamrock combined) was hoisted and a salute fired by the men in the fort at the same time the brass band from St. Boniface struck up some lively tunes. Again and again the salutes were fired until at last they thought they had wasted powder enough. The band accompanied by a guard then proceeded to the town and serenaded the citizens. The Shamrock on the flag looks significant, but on enquiry I find that it is merely in compliment to Mr. O'Donoghue, an Irishman who had greatly assisted Mr. Riel in the present undertaking. This at all events is the only version of the matter I have heard. I sincerely hope there is no deeper meaning to the emblem. I am sure there is not as far as the general body of the French are concerned.

The follow... are artist's concepts of the flags flown by the Métis in 1869-70.



Everyone knows that the white [back] ground stood for the pre-Revolution standard of France, the fleur-de-lis was the emblem of the French kings as the rose is of the English, and, as to the shamrock, its presence on the new flag was intended to please O'Donoghue and friends.³

They were hauling up the flag of Riel's government, which had the French fleur-de-lis on a white [back]ground, to which the shamrock was afterwards added.⁴

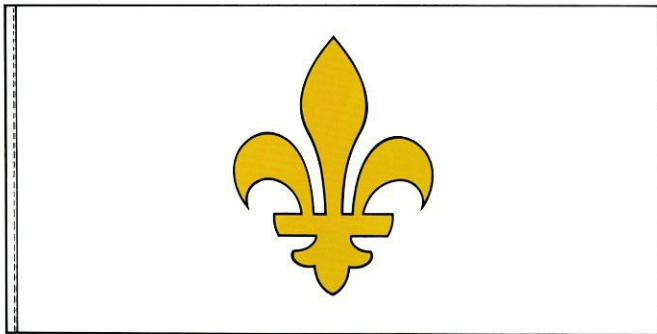
The Métis flag — a fleur-de-lis and a shamrock on a white background symbolizing Métis and Fenian unity against a common foe.⁵

When Riel established a provisional government at Fort Garry, the site of the present Winnipeg, he raised a new flag, a white flag which bore devices of a fleur-de-lis and a shamrock.⁶

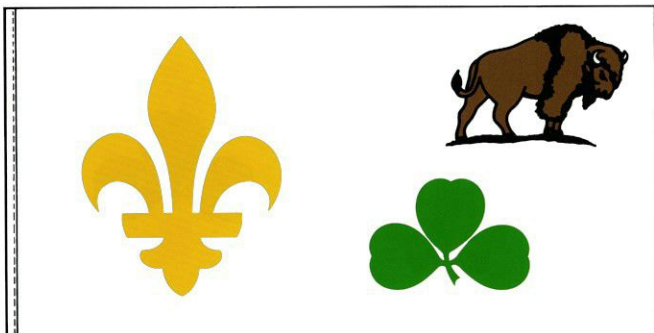
This new flag was the French Fleur-de-lis on a white [back]ground to which the Shamrock was afterwards added.⁷

He [Louis Riel] glanced at the fort and the flag he had designed: the golden symbol of medieval France on the pure white banner which had been borne westward by Champlain.⁸

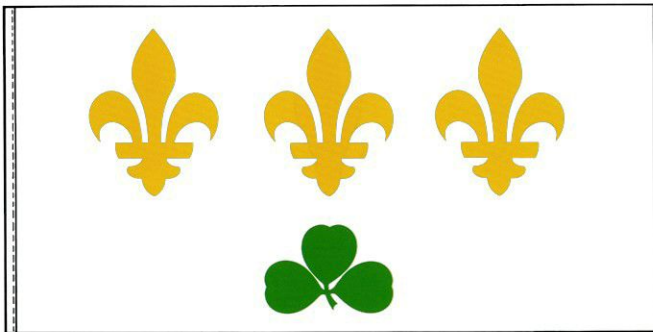
The first flag that was used by the Métis in 1869-70 was a gold fleur-de-lis, with a black border on a white background.⁹



*On December 10, the flagpole flew the revolutionary banner of the Métis Republic: the fleur-de-lis and shamrock against a white background with a small buffalo in the fly.*¹⁰



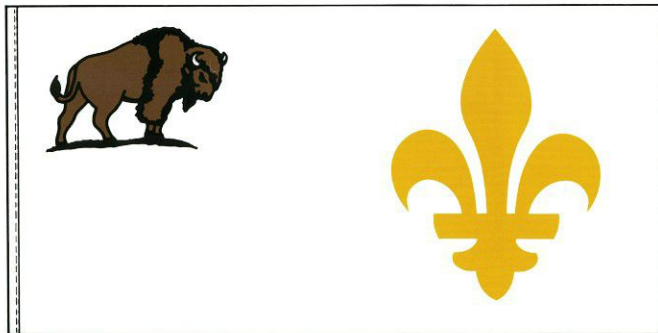
*It is made of white Duffle, 2 x 3 feet in size. There are three fleur-de-lis or flower of France — across the surface with a shamrock in the centre of the bottom edge.*¹¹



*Louis Schmidt, Riel's secretary and friend of his school days, describes it as having a white background with fleur-de-lis and a shamrock, with a big buffalo in relief in the lower part.*¹²



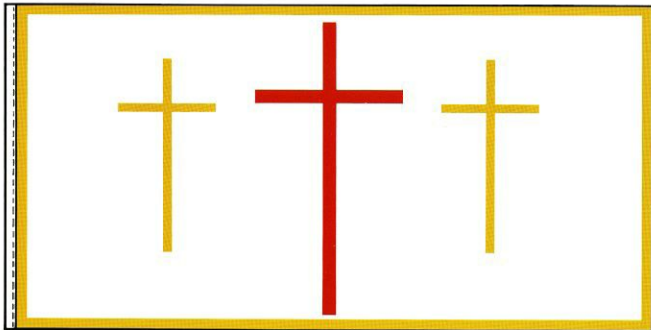
*Fleur-de-lis on a white background with a small buffalo in one corner.*¹³



*The flag of the Provisional Government evolved from many suggestions. At first it was a blue fleur-de-lis on a white background with a gold border. Under the influence of the Fenian, W. B. O'Donoghue, a green harp and shamrock were added.*¹⁴



*A new flag was adopted. It was composed of a white [back]ground, upon which were displayed three crosses — the center one large and scarlet colored, the side ones smaller and gold colored. A golden fringe bordered the white [back]ground.*¹⁵





Instead of the Company's flag, a new flag would be raised. This was an original creation; the Métis council had conceived it. Against a white background, the lilies of France and the shamrocks of Ireland had been arranged around a buffalo of the plains. From now on it would stand for the authority of the new Government in the Colony of Assiniboia.¹⁶

According to Terry Lusty, a Métis educator and historian, this flag was also adopted by Gabriel Dumont in the late 1870's to early 1880's to symbolize the military lifestyle of the buffalo hunt.

We can see that, according to various historians, at least nine flags existed. Rather than suggest that one historian was right and eight were wrong, we will assume that more than one flag existed. The facilities needed to mass-produce flags did not exist in Red River at this time. A more logical scenario would be that the concept of a flag existed, with an underlying theme put forward by the provisional government. People would make their own flags based on the theme, adding or altering each flag to their own personal tastes. For example, a buffalo hunter returning home from the fort after a day

of trading might describe to his wife a flag that he had seen fluttering above the fort, and ask her to copy this flag for their home. After he describes the flag, possibly the fleur-de-lis and shamrock, one of them might have the idea of adding on a small buffalo in the corner because he is a buffalo hunter and this will identify the flag as his own. If this was done in many households, this could provide a possible explanation for the various descriptions of the historians.

The flag of the provisional government flew until April 20, 1870, when it was taken down and replaced by the Union Jack of Britain. Howard describes the events which followed this act:

O'Donoghue, furious, took the hated ensign down. Riel restored it, stationed his uncle, Andre Nault, beneath it, handed him a rifle and instructed him to shoot the Treasurer of the Provisional Government if that irate Irishman again attempted to strike the Queen's colors.

O'Donoghue, thwarted, sulked for a day or two; then he got an idea. He went to "Fort Schultz," uprooted the flagpole there and brought it to Fort Garry, planted it and ran up the flag of the Provisional Government.

*Riel let it go at that.*¹⁷

William O'Donoghue was a member of the Fenian movement. The ultimate goal of the Fenians was to free Ireland from British oppression. O'Donoghue hoped to convince Riel and the Métis to support the Fenian cause and oppose British and Canadian rule. He realized that this would not happen when Riel flew the Union Jack. He was also discouraged by newspaper articles printed in the *New Nation*, the Métis newspaper. One such article, printed on April 22, 1870, reads:

*The Union Jack floats once more in our midst; and we would beg to say, that never had the slightest feeling of disrespect been felt here towards that emblem of our Nation's greatness. The old Provisional flag has done its duty well, and will still proudly fly under the protection of the one which is a bond of union amongst us. And we sincerely hope that our people, whether French or English, and strangers, who have lately come along us and been led into error, but now desire to promote their prosperity, will remember that there should be no distinction, no flag, and no interest but what should be common to all.*¹⁸



The life of a buffalo hunter was very precarious. Men and women would share equally in the rewards and difficulties. A flag was required in preparation for the upcoming hunt. The raising of the camp flag would be a call to order for planning and beginning the buffalo hunt.



CHAPTER THREE

Flags of 1885

Settlements began to spring up throughout the Saskatchewan District of the North West Territories during the 1870s and early 1880s. Many Métis left Manitoba and converted their winter camps into more permanent settlements. In an effort to establish title to the land on which they lived, the residents of the North West Territories sent petitions to Ottawa. These petitions date as early as 1873 but no action was taken by the federal government to satisfy the claims.

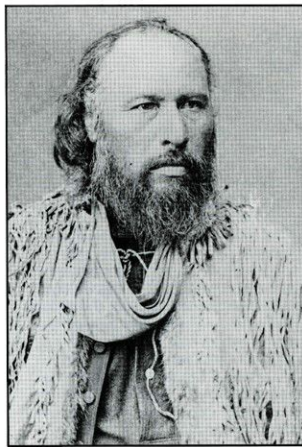
The federal government under Sir John A. Macdonald implemented what became known as the "National Policy". The plan was to bring immigrant settlers to the West to form an economy based on wheat production. Also included in the policy was construction of a railway from coast to coast. This was to be the Canadian Pacific Railroad. It was privately owned by a syndicate consisting of prominent financiers and railway barons. It was, however, largely financed with government grants and loans. Surveys were soon completed of the proposed route through Prince Albert, which was the major center in the Saskatchewan District.

Land speculators and colonization companies moved into the area. With the land claims issue unsettled these speculators were able to take advantage of the situation and acquire much of the land in and around Prince Albert. These lands could then be sold to immigrants at a tidy profit. The people of the area felt that they were being exploited by the speculators and requested government intervention to solve the land question. Rather than get involved in the turmoil, the federal government rerouted the railway to Regina, which had been named the capital of the Saskatchewan District. This enabled the government to maintain control of the land on either side of the railroad rather than have the land controlled by speculators.

The residents of the Prince Albert area, especially the new immigrant settlers, experienced a great deal of hardship. An agrarian protest movement had begun and a Settler's Union was formed in 1883. These settlers were experiencing the same difficulties in getting title to their land as the Métis. A party was sent to Montana to ask Louis Riel for his assistance in dealing with the federal government. Upon his return, Riel and his assistant, William Henry Jackson, drafted a petition which listed the grievances of the settlers and the Métis. The petition was received and acknowledged by the federal government but no action was taken to resolve the grievances.

Lawrence Clarke, the elected representative for the District of Lorne, returned from Ottawa with news about the petition. He reported: "The only answer they would get would be bullets, and that, indeed, on his way northward, he had passed a camp of five hundred policemen who were coming up to capture the halfbreed agitators."¹ Upon receiving this news, Riel formed a provisional government and began to make preparations for armed resistance. These decisions led the immigrant settlers and the English-speaking Métis to withdraw their support from Riel.

Armed conflict broke out on March 26, 1885. A Métis force led by Gabriel Dumont confronted and defeated a larger force of police and volunteers at Duck Lake. This skirmish gave the federal government the excuse it needed to send a large military force



Gabriel Dumont

Photo credit: U.S.J.B. Bibliotheque Mallet Woonsocket, R.I.

from Eastern Canada. Approximately 5,000 men under the command of General Frederick Middleton were sent out to confront 300 Métis. Middleton assembled 1,000 of these troops at Fort Qu'Appelle and began to march toward Batoche, the Métis base of command. The Métis confronted Middleton's troops at Tourond's Coulee. After a hard-fought battle in the cold and rain of April 24, 1885, both sides withdrew with no decided winner. This confrontation temporarily stopped the advance of the troops upon Batoche.

The attack on Batoche began May 9, 1885 and fighting continued for four days. The Métis ran out of ammunition and were forced to surrender. Another factor greatly contributing to the surrender was that the clergy had refused religious support to the Métis and their families. A people with strong religious convictions, the Métis were greatly distressed by the lack of support from the Church.

Religion played a great part in the life of Louis Riel. A devout Christian, Riel felt that the struggle that the Métis were involved in was a religious conflict. Religious images appeared in the flags and banners that were flown by Louis Riel and the Métis during the Resistance of 1885. These images did not signify armed resistance as a holy crusade, but rather served to rally support among the Métis with the message that their cause was right and just.

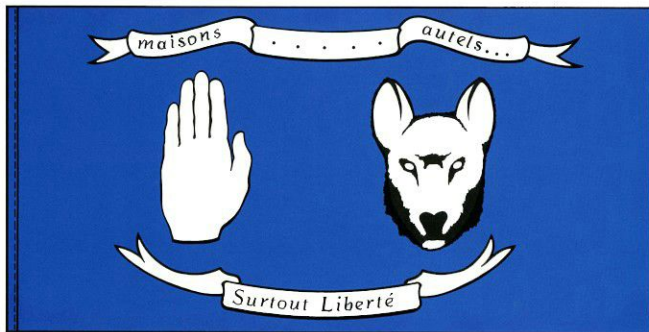


On the third day of fighting at Batoche, a truce was called to allow the Métis women and children to be evacuated from the townsite. They took up residence in cold, damp caves which had been dug along the banks of the South Saskatchewan River. They remained hidden for two weeks after the battle was over to avoid discovery by the troops. Many became ill and died from pneumonia, dysentery and starvation during this ordeal.

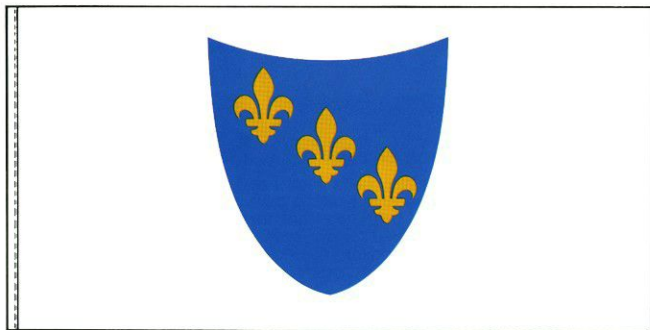
This artist's conception by Jan Parker ² of the Métis Battle Standard is open to interpretation. Literally translated, the words mean:

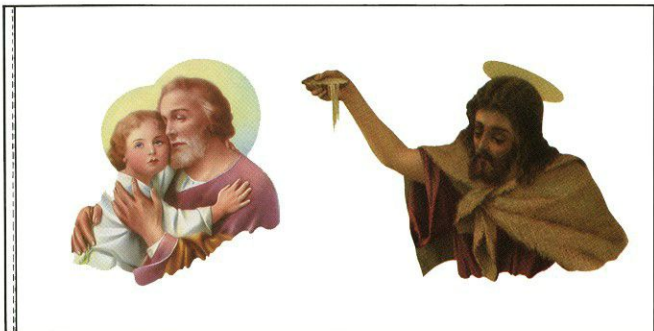
*IN THE HOUSE AT THE ALTAR
ABOVE ALL FREEDOM*

The hand and wolf could possibly mean "We lift our hand in prayer to the Lord that he may grant us the courage of the wolf to defend our homes."



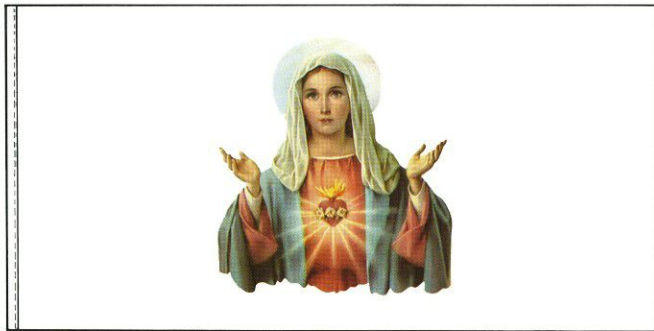
The flag of St. Louis in white with a royal blue shield strewn with three golden lilies. ³





Other flags described as having been used by the Métis were probably not used as battle standards. It is more likely that these were used as morale-building devices at meetings or while in prayer.

*The banner of the association of St. Joseph will represent on the one side St. Joseph carrying the infant Jesus and on the other St. Jean-Baptiste, the way he is represented on the banners of the St. Jean-Baptiste association.*⁴



*Louis Riel...raised the standard of the Revolt on the eve of St. Joseph making the call to action the more sanctified and putting it under the protection of St. Joseph and of Our Lady of Lourdes.... He took for a flag, the white flag of Old France which, it was said, called up and rejuvenated the ancient glories. He put upon it a large image of the immaculate heart of Mary.*⁵

A flag of St. Louis that they already had in 1870 with the hearts of Jesus and Mary next to each other.⁶

It was a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, neatly draped with pure white muslin.⁷



A picture of Our Lady of Lourdes in the Public Archives of Canada was reportedly "taken at Batoche after the Battle." It is described as "sewn on Louis Riel's flag at Batoche." It is inscribed with notes on the Riel family and dated Jan. 1885.⁸

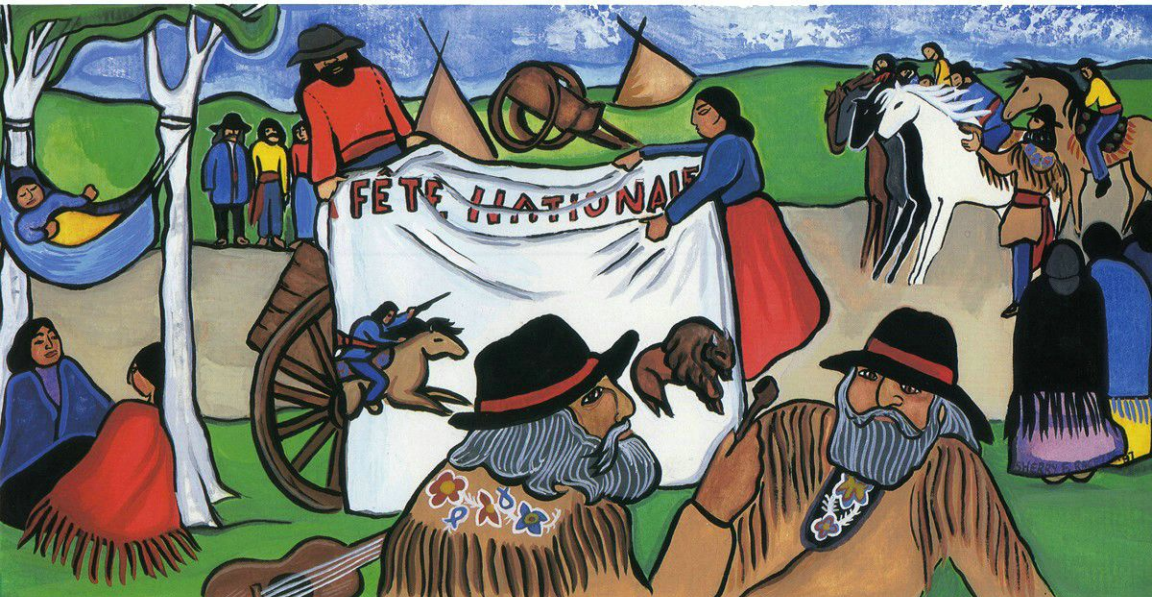


Photo credit: Public Archives of Canada



CHAPTER FOUR

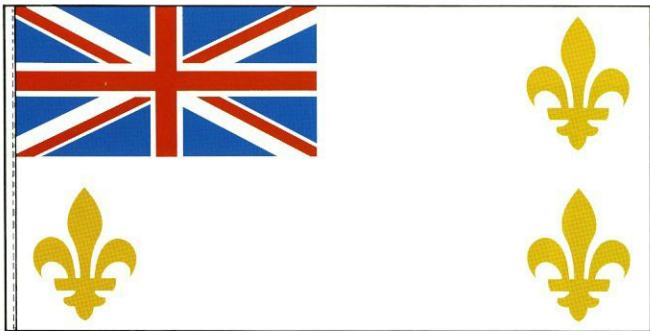
Miscellaneous Flags



Following the arrival of troops in Red River, many Métis dispersed to the Saskatchewan area. In order to maintain a sense of community the Métis people would gather at Batoche every summer for a few days of visiting and merriment. This forerunner to *Back to Batoche Days* provided these former residents of Red River with an opportunity to come together and enjoy their culture and traditions.

The Union Nationale Métisse

Another flag that is reported to be a Métis flag has a "white background, the Union Jack in the upper left and a gold-coloured fleur-de-lis in each of the other three corners." ¹ This very same standard was reported to have been designed by the Union Nationale Métisse in 1887. The Union Nationale Métisse reorganized in 1911 and adopted this same flag.



LA FÊTE NATIONALE



The Buffalo Flag

Near the present-day site of the celebration held each year at Batoche stretched *La Belle Prairie*. Every summer on July 24, the buffalo hunters would gather for *La Fête Nationale*. This was a time for Métis families who had moved from Red River to the Saskatchewan District to come together for festivities. People would travel for days to meet friends and relatives and to enjoy their heritage as Métis people.

High above the sports grounds on the judge's stand flew the magnificent buffalo flag, designed by Xavier Letendre and embroidered in France, depicting on a white background the hunter chasing the buffalo at full gallop. Steers were barbecued, and each family given their share to eat over the campfire. Races were the order of the day — horse races, pony races, foot races, Indian races. There were tugs-of-war and jumping contests, wrestling and weight-lifting. Prizes were usually a bag of flour, a side of bacon, a pound of tea, or some like staple donated by the generous merchants of Duck Lake and Prince Albert. The festivities ended with a dance, where the dancers called, "Au jour! Au jour!" each time the fiddler paused.²

Closure

Wherever we look in this world, we can see that flags of all shapes and colors emerge to express the nationalist sentiments of the groups flying those flags. The Métis were no exception. Significant milestones in the history of Métis nationalism were earmarked with a flying banner.

Contemporary Métis people are once again becoming politically active in the mainstream of Canadian history. The flag that is beginning to surface as the symbol of the Métis is the flag that Cuthbert Grant flew in the early 19th century. What is remarkable about this is that the original idea of being a distinct nation was developed under this flag. The Métis people are reaching back in history to fan the sparks of nationalism once again and to revive the concept of a land base with self-governing structures similar to those of the buffalo hunters of long ago.



Every summer Métis people gather at Batoche. Many come to participate in the cultural celebration, some come to visit and renew old acquaintances but all come to honor the Métis heroes who gave their lives in defense of their homes during the 1885 Resistance. This is a time for Métis people to unite and rededicate themselves to the ongoing struggle that Métis people face within the larger structure of Canadian society.

Footnotes

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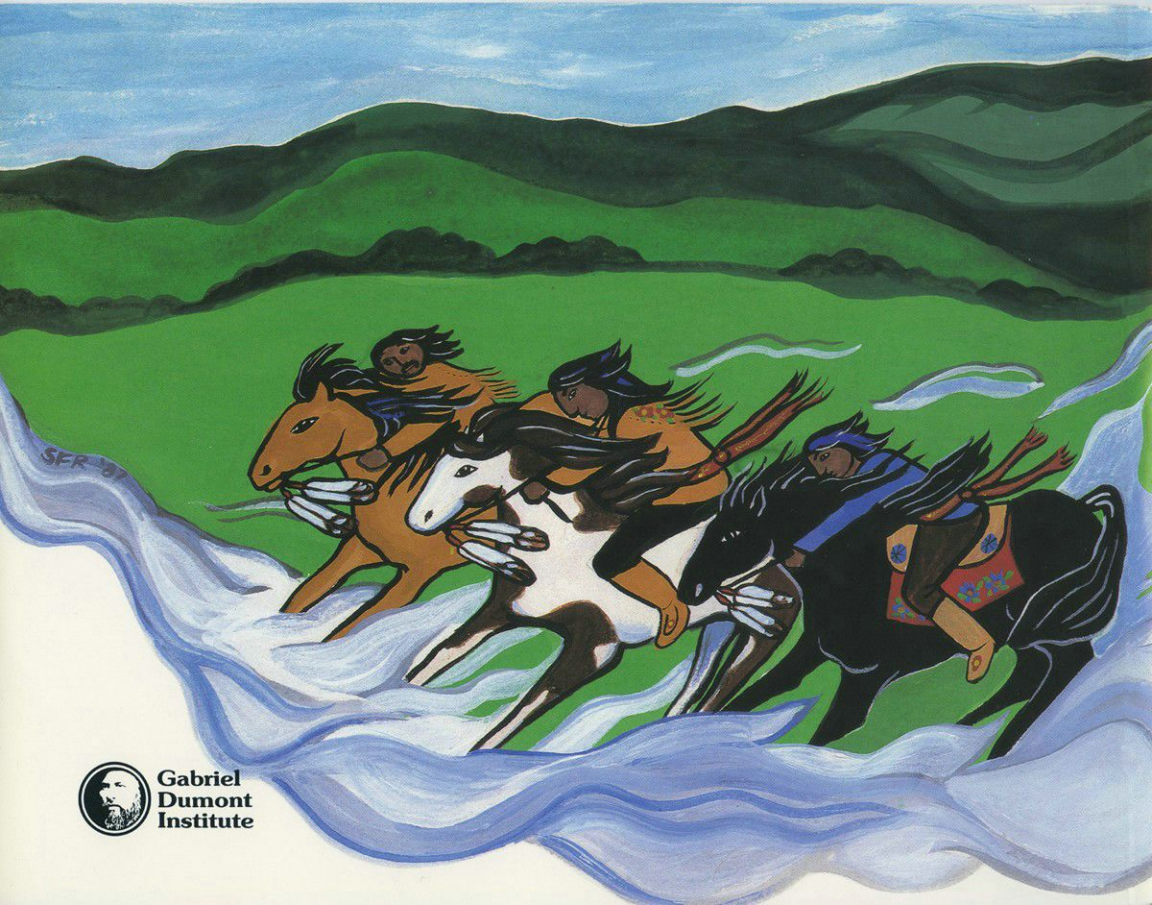
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Acknowledgements

Special thanks to these individuals and organizations whose input was very helpful:

Marilyn Belhumeur
Maria Campbell
Lynn Hirshman
David Lethbridge
Terry Lusty
Diane Payment
Edwin Roy
The Flag Research Center
P.A.C. Picture Division
La Societé Historique de Saint-Boniface

Design & Production by
LM Publication Services
Typesetting by
Publication Associates (Regina) Ltd.
Printed in Canada by
Commercial Printers Ltd.



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