



Métis Nation of Ontario

Who was Louis Riel?

Louis, the first child of Louis Riel and Julie Lagimodière, was born on October 22, 1844 in St. Boniface, Manitoba. Louis spent his childhood on the east bank of the Red River, not far from St. Boniface. He grew up among the Métis and was extremely conscious of his identity. At the age of seven, he began his education, eventually studying at the school established in the settlement in 1854 by a Christian brother.

With the aim of training priests for the young colony, in 1858, Bishop Tache sent him and two other boys, Daniel McDougall and Louis Schmidt to Montreal to continue their studies. Louis was admitted to the Collège de Montréal where he spent the next eight years studying Latin, Greek, French, English, philosophy and the sciences. Louis proved an excellent student, rising quickly to the top of his class.



In January 1864, Louis was overwhelmed with grief by the death of his beloved father whom he had not seen since leaving Red River. A subsequent attitude change prompted his teachers to question Louis' commitment to a religious vocation. A year later he left his residency at Collège de Montréal to become a day student. But after breaking the rules several times and repeatedly missing class, he was asked to leave both the college and convent.

He left College and returned to the Red River in a world fraught with intense political activity and intense nationalism. Louis lived with his aunt, Lucia Riel, and managed to find employment in a law office. He fell in love with Marie-Julie Guernon and even signed a marriage contract, but the romance ended because Marie's parents were opposed to their daughter marrying a Métis. Disappointed, Riel made his way to Chicago and St. Paul. He returned to St. Boniface after an absence of ten years, an educated but unemployed young man, with no idea that he would soon become the defender of Métis rights and the future father of Manitoba.

During Louis' absence from the Red River Settlement, Canada included only the provinces of Quebec, Ontario, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The territory known as Rupert's Land, which extended west from Ontario to the Rocky Mountains, belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and was administered by a company appointed governor and council. Fort Garry, located at the juncture of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers was at the heart of the settlement, referred to as the District of Assiniboia, and was headquarters for the Hudson's Bay Company.



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During the 1850's the Métis had succeeded in breaking the HBC fur trade monopoly. As a result, the HBC was forced to concede both a political role and certain property rights to the Métis. The separation between East and West could not last forever - contact between Canada and Métis society was inevitable. The inevitable conflict was just beginning to take shape when Louis returned.

The push by Canada to acquire more arable land had the government looking West. From the South came the threat of annexation by the United States. The threat eased in 1869, when the Hudson's Bay Company agreed to sell its territory to Canada. The settlement has changed significantly in Louis's absence. An influx of Canadian settlers from Ontario had turned Fort Garry into an active commercial centre. For economic and political reasons, these Canadians favoured the annexation of the Red River settlement to Canada.

The Métis were resentful. They saw the future of the area being decided without them, in spite of their large numbers. The Government. The French speaking, Catholic Métis feared an invasion of English Speaking Protestants from Ontario. In addition to the problems of language and religion, the Métis who were squatters or settlers without title were afraid of losing their lands. During the summer of 1869, the Canadian Government sent John Stoughton Dennis to Red River to survey the land.

A less than warm welcome by the Métis prompted Dennis to begin his survey work at Oak Point rather than Fort Garry. That the land was surveyed Ontario style, in squares, rather than with the system of long, narrow lots with river frontage used by the Métis only added to their anxiety. The Ontario system cut across existing properties and moreover, surveying had begun before the land had been officially transferred to Canada.

When Dennis and his crew arrived in Fort Garry on October 11, 1869, eighteen Métis led by Louis Riel stopped the crew of surveyors on the property of Louis' cousin, Andre Nault, and proclaimed the Canadian Government had no right to act without their permission. This act was significant for two reasons. One – it was the first act of resistance to the transfer of the settlement to Canada and two, it established Louis Riel as a champion of the Métis and Métis rights.

Also in October, William McDougall, who had been appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Rupert's Land, set out for Red River to take possession of what would come to be known as the Northwest Territory for Canada. He was accompanied by a ready-made government and armed with 300 rifles. When news of McDougall's impending arrival reached the Métis, they decided to organize a resistance. On October 16, Riel was elected Secretary of the Métis "National Committee" and John Bruce was elected President.

Five days later, the Committee sent a warning to McDougall advising him not to enter the country without special permission from them. To strengthen their position, the Métis erected



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a barricade where the trail from Pembina crossed the La Salle River—a place McDougall had to pass. Riel's initiative was opposed by the conservative wing in the settlement and those in administrative positions.

Riel was summoned to appear before the Council of Assiniboia. He let it be known that while he remained faithful to the British Crown, he was opposed to McDougall's arrival and invited the English group to join him. Riel objected to the unlawful entry of the Canadian Government into the west, saying he believed the west had the right to negotiate its own terms of entry into Confederation.

McDougall and his entourage arrived in Pembina at the end of October. They ignored the Committee's warning, and without McDougall proceeded to St. Norbert where they were stopped and escorted back to the American border accompanied by 30 Métis. On November 2, McDougall met with the same fate. The same day, the Métis took possession of Fort Garry, establishing their control over the surrounding area. However, with only the support of the French Catholic population, their power was precarious. Riel knew he would need the backing of all elements in the settlement for successful negotiation with the Canadian Government.

A series of meetings aimed at securing the necessary support were not successful as several people objected to the way McDougall had been treated. There was however, agreement on the preparation of a list of Métis rights. On November 23, Riel proposed that a provisional government be formed to replace the Council of Assiniboia. The surprised English-speaking half-breeds, did not believe they had the mandate to make such a decision and asked for a few days adjournment to consult.

The official land transfer to Canada was set December 1, 1869. During the period of unrest, Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald had postponed payments to the HBC but McDougall, the government's representative, was not notified. On December 1, he read the Proclamation announcing the transfer of the territory from the HBC to Canada. The Proclamation legitimized Riel's Provisional Government because the government of Canada had not kept up the payments for the land.

On December 10, the flag of Riel's Provisional Government was hoisted on the flag pole at Fort Garry and on December 27, Louis Riel replaced John Bruce as President of the Provisional Government and Donald Smith, the Hudson's Bay Company representative in Canada and a government agent, arrived in the settlement. At a two day meeting in January, Smith made it known that his government intended to negotiate Métis rights with the people of the Red River Settlement. Riel proposed that a new list of rights be drawn up by 20 French-speaking and 20 English-speaking representatives.

The work was completed in February and with unanimous consent, Riel formed another more representative provisional government. Three delegates were chosen to present the List of



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Rights to the Canadian Government. Although it seemed things were set to return to a state of calm, it was not to be. A group of Canadians was preparing a Counter-Riel movement. The outcome was that Louis Riel allowed the execution of Thomas Scott for defying the authority of the Provisional Government, fighting with the guards and for insulting the President. Riel was forced into exile.

In March of 1870, three delegates left for Ottawa to negotiate the terms of entry into Confederation. The government was convinced to introduce the Manitoba Bill in the House of Commons. On May 12, 1870, the Manitoba Act, based on the Métis List of Rights, was passed by the Parliament of Canada. The Bill included provisions that protected Métis lands, guaranteed their right to religion and to the use of their language in the legislature and the courts. Riel, as head of the Provisional Government, was charged with maintaining peace and order while awaiting the arrival of the first Lieutenant-Governor, Adams G. Archibald, and the troops that would accompany him.

The troops, which arrived before Archibald, were supposed to restore order and keep the peace. But some of the soldiers were out to avenge the death of Thomas Scott. Warned of their intentions, Riel had time to flee to sanctuary in the United States. Riel awaited news from Red River in the Métis settlement of St. Joseph in the Dakota Territory. He was encouraged to remain in hiding as his life would be in danger if he returned.

The dispute between the Métis and the troops were growing in number and Riel found it difficult to remain in hiding. He returned in September and intervened in a plan for the Métis to join with the Irish Fenians in a raid on Manitoba. Believing that the Métis future lay with Canada, not with the United States, Riel assured Archibald that the Métis would not join the Fenians and he kept his word.

Although grateful for his support against the Fenians, Archibald determined that he would be able to better keep the peace if Riel left the country for a while. Riel reluctantly accepted a \$1,000 payment and left Manitoba in February, 1872 with bounty hunters in pursuit. Again he found it difficult to stay away and Riel returned in June where he began to campaign as a candidate in the federal election for the Manitoba constituency of Provencher. On the advice of friends, he eventually withdrew in favour of George-Etienne Cartier, who had been defeated in his own riding.

Riel believed that Cartier would defend the Métis cause. However, Cartier died a few months later and although Louis was subsequently elected by acclamation, the House would not allow him to take his seat. Frustrated, he returned to the United States. In May 1874, he tried for a second time to take his seat, but once again had to flee to New York. In 1877, the new Prime Minister, Alexander Mackenzie, granted Riel amnesty for the trouble in 1869-1870 on the condition he not return to Canada for five years. Exile was a time of anguish for Louis. He was often depressed and claimed that he had visions of a mission to fulfil.



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His uncle, John Lee, eventually took him to Montreal where he was confined to an asylum under the name of Louis R. David. Shortly thereafter, he was transferred to the asylum at Beauport where he gradually recovered his health. Riel was discharged from the asylum in January 1878 with the recommendation that he avoid excitement. He returned to the U.S. and fell in love with Evelina Barnabe. Less interested in politics, Riel tried to find work so that he might have something to offer Evelina.

Finally, he decided to return to the west. Evelina did not think she would be able to adapt to prairie life and after several months, Riel stopped writing to her and the relationship ended. By the fall of 1878, life in Manitoba had changed a great deal. An influx of immigrants was driving the Métis away. Stripped of their land and their way of life, the Métis were moving farther and farther west to settle along the Saskatchewan River at places such as Lac La Biche, Qu'Appelle, Edmonton, Prince Albert, Duck Lake and Batoche.

Riel had followed the Buffalo Hunt and worked as an agent, trader and woodcutter near Carroll, in the Montana Territory since 1879. He married Marguerite Monet Bellehumeur on March 6, 1882. Riel took an interest in American politics and became an American citizen. When his exile ended, he paid a brief visit to his mother, then returned to the U.S. where he became a schoolmaster to provide for his family, which now included two children. Although he was a good teacher, Louis was not happy. He had hoped to instruct the Métis but found that they made little progress, coming to class sporadically and preferring to follow the hunt.

One June day, Riel received a visit from four Métis: Gabriel Dumont, Moïse Ouellette, Michel Dumas, and James Isbister. They had come to ask Louis to once again lead the Métis. They had travelled from northern Saskatchewan where most of the Métis had settled after 1869. They had resumed their traditional way of life, but it was once again threatened by an influx of settlers and immigrants. Their rights were no longer being respected; their lands were being taken; and, the government was not listening to them.

Louis made up his mind quickly. The dream he had cherished for so long was coming true: his people needed him. After an absence of 15 years, he returned to Canada. The years of exile had left their mark and he now had an opportunity to reclaim his rights and those of his brethren from the Canadian Government. Louis set out for Batoche with his wife and two children, arriving around the beginning of July 1884. On July 8, he addressed the Métis. His program was a moderate one, directed as much toward the Indians and the white settlers as the Métis. All three groups responded warmly to his presence.

Each group was to retain its independence, but a central committee would formulate specific demands to be sent to Ottawa. A decision to send petitions to Ottawa on behalf of the people was made, however several of Riel's supporters would have preferred bolder action. The Indian and the Métis were dying of hunger and the European settlers were anxious to have the land issue resolved. On December 16, 1884, after several public meetings, a petition was dispatched



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to Ottawa demanding: that the settlers be given title to the land they occupied; the districts of Saskatchewan, Assiniboia and Alberta be granted provincial status; laws be passed to encourage the nomadic Indians and Métis to settle on the land; and, that the Indians be better treated.

In spite of the support Riel received from the Métis, anti-Riel feeling prevailed among the Catholic clergy who feared his power and were suspicious of his religious beliefs. Their opposition caused the breach between Riel and his church to grow even wider. Led by Father Andre, the clergy tried to oust Riel as Métis leader, but were unsuccessful. On February 11, 1885, the federal government answered the petition, promising to appoint a commission to investigate the Métis claims. The first step would be a census of the Métis in the Northwest Territories.

This proposal angered the Métis who were hoping for a quicker solution to their problems. Seeing that nothing had been accomplished, Riel asked the Métis if they wanted him to continue as their leader. Forsaken by their priests, the Métis reaffirmed their vision of Riel as leader and prophet. Over the winter of 1885, tension began to mount among the Indian tribes as they fell victim to hunger and disease and the Indian agents did not have the resources necessary to relieve their suffering. The Indians realized their situation was similar to that of the Métis and they too turned to Riel. On March 19, the Feast of St. Joseph, Riel established a Provisional Government and took possession of the local church as his headquarters.

Pierre Parenteau was chosen as the first President and Gabriel Dumont was chosen Adjutant-General. Shortly after the formation of the Provisional Government, Riel became aware that his authority was weakening. The church was hostile because the clergy played no role in the new nation and the English-speaking Métis and settlers refused to take up arms. Once again, Riel found himself supported by only the French-speaking Métis and the Indians.

That prompted Riel to attempt the capture of Fort Carlton because he considered it essential to his operations. He hoped to occupy it without violence, but the mounted police reinforced its garrison. That left Riel with two options - negotiate or attack. He opted for negotiation, but before that was done, fighting broke out at Duck Lake. In an attempt to stop Riel, Major Crozier had left Fort Carlton with 56 mounted policemen and 41 civilian volunteers. Led by Gabriel Dumont, the Métis met them at Duck Lake.

Dumont was able to draw the troops into a valley where Crozier was forced to come to a halt. Two horsemen, Métis Isidore Dumont and Cree Chief Falling Sand advanced to meet Crozier. Believing they wished to parley, Crozier and a guide named McKay advanced. The four men stopped in the middle of the valley and Crozier extended his hand as a gesture of friendship. Thinking they had been betrayed, Falling Sand made a grab for McKay's rifle. The guide fired and Isidore Dumont fell dead from his horse.



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The battle of Duck Lake had begun. After 40 minutes, his force decimated, and Crozier gave the order to retreat. Ten of Crozier's troops had been killed and 13 wounded in the battle. Riel intervened, preventing further casualties by stopping Dumont from pursuing and killing all the retreating soldiers. But the outcome of the battle made the Indians and Métis realize that the Canadians were not invincible. Two hundred Cree attacked Battleford and Fort Pitt, killing six. At Frog Lake, Wandering Spirit and his followers murdered the Indian Agent, Thomas Quinn, and two priests, Father Fafard and Father Marchand.

Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald had not taken the recent events in the west seriously, but the Frog Lake massacre caught his attention. The government responded, increasing the amount of money given to the Indians for food and by mobilizing a military force of 8,000 men under the command of Major General Middleton. Thanks to the newly-built railroad, government troops arrived in Winnipeg 10 days after the Battle of Duck Lake. Three columns of troops headed west to deal with the uprising in Saskatchewan.

It was the intent of Gabriel Dumont and 350 Métis to defend Batoche. Dumont believed that the only effective way of doing this was through Indian warfare style surprise attacks followed by hasty retreats. Riel opposed this plan. He wanted to avoid violence for as long as possible, in the hope the negotiations would conclude successfully. This decision proved disastrous for the Métis because it enabled government troops to reach Batoche safely. Dumont, however, decided to set a trap for him at Fish Creek. On April 24, Riel, Dumont and 200 Métis set out from Batoche. A messenger brought word that a detachment of mounted police were approaching Batoche coming from Qu'Appelle.

Dumont sent 50 men back to defend the settlement, under Riel's leadership. With Dumont in command, the battle of Fish Creek ended in a stalemate. The Métis, however counted it as a victory because they had successfully stopped the Canadians' advance. Back in Batoche, Riel was beginning to have doubts about his decisions. There were reports that troops had arrived in the vicinity and in despair, he appealed to Poundmaker and Big Bear for help. However, help was not forthcoming because they could not arrive in time.

The stalemate at Fish Creek made the Canadian troops cautious and they stopped to rest for two weeks. When the battle ensued, they scored small victories, but the government troops proved too strong. On the fourth day of the battle, the Métis were defeated. After ensuring the safety of his family, Riel withdrew into the woods to pray. He did not attempt to flee. When the government commander demanded that he surrender, Riel replied that he would give himself up to fulfil God's will and that he wanted freedom for all his council and his people.

He would surrender so that he could continue to defend the Métis cause. After his surrender, Riel was taken to Regina. Dumont tried unsuccessfully to recapture Batoche, but upon hearing that Riel had given himself up, he fled to the United States. The rebellion was over. The aftermath of these events was that Riel was charged with high treason. His trial had disastrous



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consequences for Riel and for Canada. When it began on July 20, Riel entered a plea of “not guilty.” The jury was entirely Anglo-Saxon and Protestant.

Riel’s lawyer wanted to plead insanity, saying that Riel was not responsible for his actions. Because Riel objected so strenuously to this strategy, his own lawyers had the judge rule that Riel did not have permission to speak. Nor were Riel’s lawyers allowed to speak of the grievances which led to the rebellion. The judge declared that it was Riel, not the Government of Canada, who was on trial. Damning testimony from witnesses, who insisted Riel was mentally unstable before and during the rebellion did not help.

Towards the end of the trial, Riel was given the chance to speak. After a moment of prayer, he reviewed the troubles in the northwest which led to the Rebellion. He began with the sufferings his people had endured and the government’s inactivity. He maintained with dignity that he was not insane and that he did not want to be acquitted by reason of insanity. He did not deny that he had previously been committed to a mental hospital, but pointed out that the doctors had certified he was cured. He asked if visions, prophecies and missions signified insanity? He closed with a few eloquent comments on the sacrifices he had made and asked for justice.

On July 21, the trial adjourned for one week to allow time for the witnesses to appear. The examination of the witnesses began on July 28 and continued through to August 1. On September 18, Riel was sentenced to hang. That kicked off a series of appeals. First the Manitoba Court of Queens’ Bench affirmed the original sentence, but the execution was postponed until October 16. A second appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council was dismissed and the execution set for November 10.

The Prime Minister, uncertain about a decision, yielded to pressure from Ontario and Quebec and granted a third reprieve – this time to allow a medical commission to examine Riel. The commission was unable to pronounce him insane and the date of his execution was set for November 16. While awaiting death, Riel was visited by his family and on November 6, he penned his will. He spent his final night and early morning hours writing one last letter to his Mother and receiving the Last Rites. At 8:00 a.m., he climbed the stairs to the scaffold where he was executed by hanging.

On November 19, a service for the repose of his soul was sung at St. Mary’s Church in Regina. On December 9, his body was returned to St. Vital where it lay in state at his Mother’s house for two days. A requiem mass was sung December 12 at St. Boniface Cathedral and his body is buried in the churchyard.



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