

# LOUIS RIEL

1844 - 1885



Louis Riel was Métis, born in St. Boniface, Red River Settlement (located within present-day Winnipeg, Manitoba) in 1844. When he was a boy, Riel was sent to Montreal to be educated, and later became an apprentice to a Quebec-based lawyer. In 1868, he returned to Red River to assist his mother and siblings after the death of his father. On his journey home, Louis heard stories of the conditions and growing unrest in the settlements on the banks of the Red River. He saw and understood the plight of his people and their fear of losing their way of life and ancestral lands.



Louis Riel and the Provisional Council in 1869.

The Red River Resistance (1869-70) was initiated by the Hudson's Bay Company transferring the territory of Rupert's Land to the Dominion of Canada. Many Métis occupied this area of land and objected to Canada's expansion into the west without the consent of the Métis. As Canadian surveyors began laying the groundwork for Canadian settlement in the Red River region, the Métis began to push back. They formed a provisional government, with Riel as their leader, and drew up a *List of Right* which prepared the path to negotiate the entrance of the Red River Settlement into Canadian Confederation. Canada's attitude toward the Métis resistance was expressed by Prime Minister John A. MacDonald in February 23, 1870, when he was quoted as saying, "These impulsive half-breeds have got spoiled by this emeute (uprising) and must be kept down by a strong hand until they are swamped by the influx of settlers." Regardless, Riel and the provisional government continued to advocate for their rights, resulting in the negotiation of the *Manitoba Act, 1870* which created the province of Manitoba, and through Section 31 guaranteed 1.4 million acres to the children of Métis families residing in the province on July 15, 1870. Despite Riel's efforts, and the express promise to the Métis outlined in Section 31, within the next 10 years, Métis families in the Red River Settlement continued to lose their land and homes to incoming settlers.



Riel under arrest near Batoche, SK in May, 1885.

Riel was elected to the Canadian parliament three times, but was never able to take his seat due to political pressures and a \$5,000 bounty put on his head by the Ontario Legislature. As a result, Riel was forced into exile in the United States. In 1884, answering a call sent out from his people, Riel returned north and once again tried to protect Métis rights, lands and way of life in what is now Saskatchewan.

His efforts were answered with a military response from the Canadian government, triggering the 1885 North-West Resistance. Following the Métis defeat at Battle of Batoche, the last major battle of the Resistance, Riel surrendered on May 15, 1885 and welcomed a public trial to tell the story of the Métis. A jury comprised of English, Protestant and non-Indigenous jurors found him guilty of treason, but recommended mercy. One juror wrote to Parliament: “Had the Government done their duty and redressed the grievances of the half-breeds of Saskatchewan...there would never have been a second Riel Rebellion, and consequently no prisoner to try and condemn.” The judge, however, ignored the jury’s suggestion and sentenced Riel to death. On November 16, 1885, Louis Riel was hung in Regina, Saskatchewan, as a message from Prime Minister MacDonald to the Métis and others who would challenge Canada’s western expansion.

Riel’s legacy, however, lives on. In 1992, he was formally given status as a founding father of Manitoba, and in 2024 he was recognized as the province’s first premier. In 1998, the Government of Canada issued a *Statement of Reconciliation* and referred to “the sad events culminating in the death of the Métis leader, Louis Riel,” and referenced the need to find ways of “reflecting Louis Riel’s proper place in Canada’s history.” In 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin acknowledged that Riel’s contribution was not only “to the Métis Nation, but to Canada as a whole.”

Louis Riel fought for the protection of Métis rights, lands, languages, and way of life. In fighting for these rights, he not only fought for the rights of his own community but for others, including those of First Nations and settlers. He also fought for the protection of Métis language rights, and dreamed of a day when settler prejudices would no longer impede on Métis traditions, culture and way of life. Today, the Métis people continue advocating to fulfill Riel’s dream of the Métis assuming their rightful place within the Canadian Confederation.

Every year on November 16<sup>th</sup>, on the anniversary of the death of Louis Riel, Canadians from across the country remember the man, his cause and his legacy.



Lawyer Jean Teillet, Louis Riel’s great-grand niece, holds aloft a copy of the Powley Supreme Court decision at a Riel Day ceremony on the lawn of Queen’s Park in Toronto.



MNO Senators and Veterans lead the procession at a Riel Day ceremony on November 16th at Queen’s Park in Toronto.