

The First Métis Uprising, 1869-70

(1) In 1812, Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk, brought Scottish settlers into what was to become the Canadian North-West, to supply food for the Hudson's Bay Company trading posts in the area. (2) At this time the majority of the local Native peoples and the Métis worked for the rival Northwest Company which was centred in Montréal.

(3) Hostilities increased between the settlers as the Hudson's Bay Company sought to extend its monopoly into the area. On June 16, 1816, Hudson's Bay Company governor, Robert Semple, (4) with 25 men, attempted to intercept a group of Métis escorting three Red River carts loaded with pemmican. In the Battle of Seven Oaks, which followed, Semple and 19 of his men were killed. The victorious Métis took temporary possession of the local Hudson's Bay post, Fort Douglas. (5) This battle lived long in the Métis folklore. Seventy years later they were to go into battle, this time with the Canadian government, singing the Song of Pierre Falcon.

(6) In 1821 the two companies were merged and a lively and distinctive community of fur traders, buffalo hunters and part time farmers, both Native, French and English-speaking Métis, grew up in what is now southern Manitoba. (7) While the old rivalries died hard, the hardships of the frontier welded the people into a community which was to develop a sense of nationhood, (8) a Métis nation.

Louis Riel's ancestors were traders and trappers in the North-West long before Lord Selkirk's settlers arrived. (9) Marie-Anne Gaboury, Louis Riel's maternal grandmother, who was born in Maskinonge, Québec, came to the North-West in 1807 with her husband Jean Baptiste Lagimodière. Her daughter Julie, who was to become Louis Riel's mother, was the second white child born in the North-West.

(10) Louis Riel Sr., whose son was to be twice leader of the Métis, was born in Québec where he trained as a wool carder. In 1838 he began three years of service in Red River for the Hudson's Bay Co. (11) He then returned to Québec to enter a seminary. However the religious life was not for him. He returned to Red River where he married Julie Lagimodière.

(12) Louis Riel Sr. built a flour mill on the banks of the River Seine, north of Winnipeg. (13) His actual mill stones are on display today in the grounds of the St. Boniface Cathedral in Winnipeg. Louis Riel, his son, was born, October 22, 1844, in St. Boniface. (14)

In 1848 Louis Riel Sr. was a leader of a rebellion of Métis settlers against the attempts of the Hudson's Bay Company to prevent the struggling farmers from obtaining supplies from the United States. He asked the local priest: (15) "Are men justified in resisting abuse of power?" The answer was yes. The Métis fought the arrest of one of their fellows. Restriction of trade was ended. They took up the chant: "Commerce is free! Long live liberty!"

(16) The Riel family home stands today on the River Road in what is now a suburb of Winnipeg.

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(17) Louis Riel was an excellent student. In 1858, at the age of 14, he was selected by Bishop Taché (18) to go to the Seminary of St. Sulpice in far away Montréal.

(19) This historic building stands today, hidden behind a wall in the heart of Montréal, much as it did in 1858.

(20) Louis Riel graduated to the College of Montréal where he began training to be a priest. In February, 1864, he was greatly shaken by the news of his father's death. In 1865, he left the seminary, as his father had done. (21) He went to live with his uncle, John Lee, at Miles-end, a village north of Montréal.

(22) Louis Riel became a law student in the office of Rodolphe Laflamme, a well-known liberal, intellectual, a lawyer and a leader of Les Rouges, which was to become the Liberal Party of Quebec.

(23) Riel also was influenced by Laflamme's arch enemy, Bishop Ignace Bourget, the leader of the most conservative elements of the Catholic Church in Québec. These two men were to dominate Riel's thinking the rest of his life. (24) French Canadian Nationalism, controversy over religion and general opposition to Confederation made Québec politics of the day interesting indeed.

Riel found himself no more suited for law than he was for the Church. In 1868 he set out for the North-West, going by way of northern United States.

(25) Confederation had been accomplished in 1867. Now the new Dominion of Canada, under the leadership of Sir John A. Macdonald and the Conservative Party began negotiations with England (26) to take over the North-West from the Hudson's Bay Company. Opposition to Confederation had been strong: Macdonald was to further sow the seeds of its destruction.

(27) "It was early in the morning", Riel wrote, "when I saw my birthplace again; a Sunday before sunrise. It was a beautiful day. I saw my very dear mother, brothers, and sisters that very same day."

(28) Fort Garry, at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine River, was the headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company. Around it had grown the bustling town of Winnipeg.

(29) Over its gates flew the flag of the Hudson's Bay Company.

An ailing William MacTavish was the Hudson's Bay Company governor of the territory. (30) He valiantly attempted to carry on a government no longer adequate to the needs of the growing number of settlers and adventurers from Canada. (31) A lively controversy had arisen as to the future of the colony, the vast majority favouring union with Canada in both the English and French-speaking communities. Disagreement arose over the terms. The French-speaking Métis were concerned that their religious and language rights be preserved.

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(32) The French-speaking Métis were particularly concerned about the activities of a small group of English-speaking people who were virulently anti-Métis. They had gone so far as to write in The Nor'Wester, the local newspaper, in 1860, that: (33) "The wise and prudent will be prepared to receive and to benefit by an influx of settlers, whilst the indolent and the careless, like the native tribes of the country, will fall back before the march of superior intelligence."

(34) Their leader eventually came to be John Schultz, fur trader and land speculator, a leader of the Loyal Orange Lodge and the Canada First Movement, which was founded in 1868. (35) Schultz led the cry for union with Canada without prior conditions, that is, without guarantees of local rights and self-government for the Métis majority.

(36) As negotiations with England dragged on, the Government of Canada proceeded illegally to assume control. The residents of Red River were not consulted when it sent surveyors into their territory on October 1, 1869 as soon as the agreement had been ratified by the British Parliament, but before Canada actually took possession, Sir John A. Macdonald appointed William McDougall first Lt.-Governor of the North-West Territory. McDougall immediately dispatched surveyors and road builders and shortly thereafter he also left for the North-West to formally take possession of it for Canada.

(38) The surveyors were under the direction of Lt. John Stoughton Dennis; a ner-do-well whom McDougall had appointed Chief Dominion Land Surveyor. They trespassed on Métis farms, (39) resurveying them from the traditional French-Canadian system of strip farms along rivers into counties. They laid out roads through farms and staked claims to the best of the land for themselves, whether it was occupied or not.

(40) Louis Riel lost no time in becoming involved. A meeting of Red River residents had been held July 24, 1869 where Métis rights were first discussed. Soon the alarmed Métis farmers (41) many of whom had never been given deeds to their land by the Hudson's Bay Company, set up patrols to prevent the theft of their lands. (42) Riel's legal training, his growing political abilities and his fluency in both English and French as well as native languages soon made him a leader of his people.

(43) On October 11, 1869, the surveyor Adam Webb recorded in his diary that his crew was ordered to cease work by a patrol of unarmed Métis led by Louis Riel.

(44) It was the first decisive act of resistance. On October 16, the Métis elected the "National Committee of the Métis" with Louis Riel as secretary.

(45) (46)

(47) The Committee was soon informed that McDougall, with 350 Enfield rifles in his baggage, was approaching Red River. They met at St. Norbert, October 21, and proclaimed that the National Committee of the Métis of Red River orders William McDougall not to enter the territory of the North-West (48) without special permission of the committee. This act caused great controversy among the inhabitants of the Red River.

(49) At a meeting with H.B.C. officials, Louis Riel declared that "They did not feel that they acted unlawfully; they were 'simply acting in defense of their own liberty!'" He urged their English-speaking fellow countrymen to join and aid in securing their common rights.

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(50) On November 2, 1869, an armed patrol of Métis ordered McDougall to leave the North-West. McDougall had little choice but to obey and he retreated to Pembina in North Dakota. Riel now saw that he must delay occupation of the Red River by Canada until the guarantees the Métis sought were assured. (51) Fort Garry's location gave control of the region to those who held it; furthermore, the Métis needed its supplies. Riel and 120 armed men occupied it without opposition.

(52) On November 6, 1869, Riel, who had now been elected president of the National Committee, issued a public notice to all French and English-speaking parishes to democratically elect representatives to meet at Fort Garry to discuss the future of the North-West.

(53) The meeting was held November 16 in Fort Garry in the officers' quarters. "If we are rebels," Riel said, "we are rebels against the Company that sold us, and against Canada that wants to buy us. (54) We are not in rebellion against the British supremacy which still has not given its approval for the final transfer of the country. . . We are true to our native land . . . We want the people of Red River to be a free people." The meeting adjourned to allow the delegates to return to their parishes and consider the proposals.

(55) A compromise resulted in the publication, December 1, 1869, of a List of Rights which the people of Red River were to hold as the formal conditions for the entry of their land into Confederation. This document, which was largely drawn up by Louis Riel, was to form the basis of the constitution of Manitoba.

(56) That same day, McDougall crossed the border into the North-West and read his own illegal "Proclamation" taking possession of the North-West for Canada". He appointed the surveyor John Stoughton Dennis "Conservator of the Peace," giving him authority and weapons to raise an army against the Métis. (57) Dennis bolstered his forces by arming Sioux and Swampy tribesmen.

Riel seized all guns and ammunition in Winnipeg shops and houses and prepared Fort Garry, to meet an attack. (58) December 3, he surrounded the house of John Schultz, which had been armed and fortified by the Canada Firsters. On December 7, he demanded the surrender of "Fort Schultz", as it was called, with its 48 men and its supplies. The occupants, including Schultz, were marched off to prison in Fort Garry. (59) Dennis fled back to Canada, soon to be followed by the hapless McDougall. There he stirred up religious and racial prejudice against the Métis and against Riel.

(60) On December 10, the Métis raised their fleur-de-lis and shamrock flag over Fort Garry. On December 27, the National Committee of the Métis officially became the Provisional Government of the Métis. (61) Riel was elected President.

Soon the Provisional Government was functioning with its own army, police force and legal system. Andrew Bannantyne was postmaster (62) and he prepared this proof for a postage stamp for the "Republic of Canada."

(63) This bell, which Riel as president, used to call his secretary, remains with us to this day.

(64) The army of the Métis was trained by Captain Norbert Gay, a cavalry expert--and spy--sent out by Napoleon III of France, to assist the new government in the hope that the North-West might once again become a possession of France.

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(65) On August 20, 1872, two years later, Gay, back in Europe, wrote to Riel extending Napoleon's best wishes. The desperate struggle of Riel and the Métis were quite in keeping with accepted practice in international law.

(66) Sir John A. Macdonald was in trouble. McDougall had bungled his mission. The original date for the government of Canada to take possession of the North-West was October 1. Macdonald now withheld payment to England because he did not have an army to challenge the occupation of Fort Garry by the Métis. (67) The only soldiers at his disposal were British, stationed in Montreal. Their deployment would require the consent of the British crown. Macdonald started the wheels in motion, without making it public.

(68) December 28, Sir Donald Smith, the chief officer for the Hudson's Bay Company in Canada arrived at Fort Garry. He was not allowed entry until he had given his word not to subvert the Provisional Government. However, he was a spy and agent for Sir John A. Macdonald and soon began lavishing bribe money. (69) Against Riel's better judgement, Smith was permitted to speak at a meeting of the Council. (70) On Smith's recommendation, the Provisional Government appointed Fr. Ritchot, Alfred Scott and John Black to go to Ottawa to meet with the Canadian Government. They left at the end of March, 1870.

(71) Meanwhile the Provisional Government kept the peace despite the activities of John Schultz, other members of the Canada First Movement and the Orange Lodge. One of the most bigotted was Thomas Scott (72) who had been captured several times bearing arms against the government and subsequently released after giving his word each time to keep the peace. Finally the Métis lost patience when he physically attacked Riel himself. He was tried by a Métis court, found guilty, and when he made it clear that he intended to persist in his activities, sentenced to death.

(73) Scott was duly executed by a Métis firing squad, March 4, 1870. Of the execution Riel wrote, "We exercised in all severity the governmental authority which had been entrusted to us to safeguard a colony of England, and which we had not used during three months of desperated struggle except to disarm our enemies. (74) Scott was executed because his execution was necessary to maintain order and to fulfil our duty of making order respected".

(75) It was at Kildonan Church that Schultz, who had escaped from prison, gathered his men to prepare for an attack on Fort Garry. They captured and imprisoned a young retarded Métis Norbert Parisien, (76) under the altar in a space 18 inches high. The next day, in attempting to escape, the terrified boy grabbed one of his captor's guns and in the melée shot and killed Hugh John Sutherland. His captors, including Thomas Scott bludgeoned him with an axe, wounding him so grievously that he died.

(77) In the graveyard, beside the front door of Kildonan Church, to this day can be seen the gravestone of Hugh John Sutherland. Where Parisien lies is unknown.

(78) The representatives of the Provisional Government, contrary to Smith's promises, met with arrest and rebuff in Ottawa. (79) It was only with great difficulty that the Government of Canada was forced to negotiate with them. Unknown to them, and to the Métis of Red River (80) Macdonald had received permission from England to send British troops to Red River.

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(81) Colonel Garnet Wolseley, a British officer stationed in Canada, was chosen to lead the expedition. Although supposedly a modern career soldier, his attitude to the Métis was not one of fairness or even indifference: (82) "Hope Riel will have bolted", he wrote to his wife, "for although I should like to hang him to the highest tree in the place, I have such a horror of rebels and vermin of this kidney, that my treatment of him might not be approved by the civil powers."

(83) The troops gathered at Toronto's Crystal Palace. From there it was by train to Collingwood where they boarded a steamer to Fort William. From there they marched on foot along a very rough bush trail, building it as they went. It now is known as the Dawson Route to Lake Winnipeg.

(84) Supplies were very scarce for the soldiers. The Americans, who had their own eye on the North-West, refused to offer their facilities, particularly their bake ovens at Sault Ste. Marie. Thus, when bread was available, it was a time for rejoicing and picture-taking.

(85) Enos Stutsman was an American spy, reporting to Hamilton Fish, the U.S. Secretary of State. Stutsman became a close personal friend of Riel and a trusted advisor.

(86) Another supporter of union with the U.S. was William O'Donoghue, an Irish immigrant, a refuge from the potato famine, who was driven by his hatred of the British empire and his determination that Ireland one day would be free. (87) It has been reported that Riel was offered sums of up to \$6 million to turn over possession of the North-West to the United States. Riel was penniless. But he remained firm in his belief that there was a better future for his people as full citizens of Canada.

(88) After many insults and rebuffs at the hands of Macdonald and his Québec "lieutenant," Georges-Etienne Cartier, agreement was finally reached and on May 12, the Manitoba Act was passed by the Canadian Parliament, granting Manitoba provincial status. (89) The agreement did not include amnesty, however, for those who had led the uprising. Amnesty had been one of the fundamental demands of the Provisional Government. Macdonald and Cartier promised the amnesty to (90) Archbishop Taché, saying, however, that it would, because of a legal technicality, have to come not from the Government of Canada but from Britain.

(91) The jubilant negotiators arrived back in Red River with the good news on June 17, 1870. There was general rejoicing. (92) By this time, stories of Wolseley's advance had reached Red River. However, Macdonald had assured Taché that the new Lt.-Governor, (93) Archibald Adams would arrive before Wolseley's army to assume the reigns of power from the Provisional Government.

(94) However, news reached Fort Garry that the army was near at hand. Riel went to see for himself. Believing Macdonald and Taché, Riel had disbanded his army. He now sent everyone from the fort but his immediate companions. They rode to Taché's residence. (95) He told Taché, "I will mount my horse and go with the grace of God. It does not matter what happens now. The rights of the Métis for their religion, their language have been assured by the Manitoba Act. This is what I wished. My Mission is finished." Riel, the father of Manitoba, was now a hunted fugitive. (96)

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(97) Wolseley's army captured only an abandoned fort. The "peace keeping" troops, rowdy and ill trained, overran the saloons, consuming all the supplies of liquor at Winnipeg within three days. Elizéar Goulet, François Guillemette, and H.F. O'Lone were murdered, many others viciously beaten. (98) The officials of the Provisional Government, who had waited eagerly to turn the reins of power over to the Canadian authorities were treated like a conquered people.

(99) Archbishop Antoine Taché, tragically deceived by Sir John A. Macdonald, was to spend the rest of his life petitioning for the amnesty promised Riel and attempting to justify his role in these events.

(100) Riel, as leader of the Métis, thanked by Archibald, Oct. 8, 1871 O'Donoghue too fled over the U.S. border. There still hopeful that the outraged Métis would decide to join the U.S., he raised a rag tag army of annexationists and Fenians to invade Manitoba. Riel refused to join his scheme, (101) as Governor Archibald had no army, offered the services of the Métis, who formed themselves into a fighting body again, to repel the invaders. Although Riel was a fugitive, Archibald was forced to accept. The invasion failed and Lt.-Governor (102) Archibald reviewed the Métis troops, October 8, 1871 shaking hands and thanking their leader Louis Riel!

(103) Ambrose Lépine had been the commander of the army of the Provisional Government. After the military occupation of Fort Garry, Lépine was continually harrassed, despite the many promises of amnesty made by Macdonald and Cartier (104). Then, September 14, 1873, a charge of the murder of Thomas Scott was laid against Louis Riel and Ambroise Lépine. Lépine could have fled to the U.S. but he allowed himself to be arrested. He was tried and sentenced to death.

Public outcry for and against amnesty for those who had taken part in the Provisional Government continued. (105) Lord Dufferin was appointed Governor-General in 1872. Dufferin clearly understood the Canadian government's dilemma: to grant amnesty would alienate Orange Ontario: to refuse it would enrage Québec.

Dufferin offered the perfect solution. He granted amnesty to everyone but Lépine, Riel and O'Donoghue as a reward for their support of the Crown during the Fenian incursions. (106) For Lépine there was a pardon although he was to be deprived of his civil rights until only a few years before his death in 1923. For Riel, there were to be five years of banishment. For the hapless O'Donoghue, nothing: disgrace and death.

(107) During the years after 1870, Louis Riel lived a fugitive in the U.S. and Québec. There was a price on his head: he had to be continually on the move, continually in fear of assassination, or arrest. He found solace with his friends, the Barnabé's who lived in the rectory of St. John's Catholic Church in Keeseville, New York.

(108) The Ontario Gazette of March 9, 1872, announced that the Province of Ontario would pay \$5,000 for the capture of Louis Riel. A very attractive sum.

(109) Despite his banishment, Louis Riel was elected by acclamation as the member of Parliament for the riding of Provencher on three separate occasions: once in 1873, and twice in 1874. However, if he took his seat he would expose himself to the bounty hunters.

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(110) In order to take his seat, the newly elected member of parliament must sign (111) what is called the Test Roll. After his second election, Riel, contrived a strategy to sign it. With several Québec MP's who were his friends, he walked over the bridge from Hull and quickly into the Parliament Buildings. While his friends created a diversion (112) Riel signed the roll. Quickly Riel returned to safety in Québec. Later in the House, Riel's friends moved a motion for amnesty. Their motion lost and Riel was expelled from the House. Riel returned to the harried life of a fugitive.

(113) The years of fear finally took their toll. On May 19, 1876, Louis Riel was admitted to the mental Hospital at Beauport, Québec, both to protect him from assassination and to permit him to recover from, what appears to have been a nervous breakdown.

(114) When he was released, Riel visited his friends, the Barnabés' in Keeseville, New York. Here, he fell in love with Evelina Barnabé. There was no work for him in the east, Evelina's health was frail and she was not used to the rough life of the west. (115) A few years later, Riel wrote her this letter to explain that he had met and married another who could share his new life.

(116) Things had not gone well for the Métis of Manitoba. The government took over the lands of the native peoples, giving them reserves and Scrip in return. The influx of white settlers and the dwindling buffalo herds meant the end of their traditional way of life. (117) Some gave their Scrip away for a pittance not understanding its worth: others took the decision to move further west where they could live in the old way.

(118) It was to these people that Louis Riel went for companionship and work. Riel was trader, interpreter, spokesman, woodcutter and buyer of supplies. At one point, he became a Deputy U.S. Marshall.

(119) On April 28, 1881, Louis Riel married Marguerite Monet dit Bellehumeur. Their first child, Jean was born in 1882, a daughter Angelique, was born in 1883.

(120) Marguerite and Louis Riel settled at St. Peter's Mission, Montana, where Riel worked as a teacher of Métis and Native children, training them for lives in the changing conditions that were making it impossible for them to continue their traditional way of life. When interviewed by a Winnipeg newspaper, (121) he said, ". . . every man is liable to make trifling mistakes, but had I the same thing to go through again, I would do exactly the same . . . I have always believed that I acted honestly, and the time will come when the people of Canada will see and acknowledge it."

Picture Captions

Filmstrip #1 Métis and Native Uprisings - First Métis Uprising 1869-70

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CREDITS

- (I) Oh Grandfathers as I watch your portraits one by one, you tell well
the story of your race,
- (II) Cross the silence of the years your voice can still be read, in the
lines of knowing on your face
- (III) And a thousand lies can't hide the truth that's in your eyes
- (IV) And the pride you show can't hide the pain,
- (V) And the silence that you keep
I know will soon be done,
- (VI) And your light will lead us on again.

INSERTS

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- (45) You fought long to keep the way you know from being lost,
You fought long to keep your spirit free.
- (46) And you want though life was like
The stormwinds on the grass,
Or the fire round on the forestry

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- (96) By the silver lakes the mountain streams,
By the desert cotton woods you stand,
Natural man which thanks each dawn
For earth beneath your feet
With your band of brothers close at hand.

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Oh Grandfathers as I watch your portraits
One by one, you tell well the story of your race
Cross of silence of the years
Your voice can still be read
In the lines of knowing on your face,
In the lines of knowing on your face