

# Louis Riel

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## LOUIS RIEL ONE LIFE, ONE VISION



**1844-1885**

In these pages, you are invited to read a biography of Louis Riel, Father of Manitoba, who gave his life for his people : The Metis.

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## Louis Riel - His family, his youth

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Louis, the first child of Louis Riel père and Julie Lagimodière, was born October 22, 1844, in St. Boniface. His mother was the seventh child of Jean-Baptiste Lagimodière and Marie-Anne Gaboury, who came from Québec to settle in the North-West in 1806. Louis père had been born at Ile-à-la-Crosse in 1817, the son of Jean-Baptiste Riel dit l'Irlande and Marguerite Boucher, a Franco-Déné Métisse whom he married in 1798, 'à la façon du pays'. In 1843 after spending his childhood in Québec where his parents had returned to live and following an attempt at being a seminarian, Louis Riel père returned to settle in the West, the country where he was born. Here in Red River he met Julie Lagimodière and their marriage was solemnized by Bishop Provencher on January 21, 1844, at St. Boniface Cathedral. Both were devout Catholics, as Julie had also considered a religious life before marrying Louis Riel. Their piety was to be an important factor in the family's daily life.

Louis spent his childhood on the east bank of the Red River, not far from St. Boniface and the property of his Lagimodière grandparents. He grew up among the Métis, highly aware of his identity inherited through his father's line. At the age of ten, he began his education, eventually studying at the school run by the Christian

Brothers established in the Settlement in 1854. With the aim of training priests for the young colony, Bishop Taché sent him to Montréal in 1858, along with two other boys, Daniel McDougall and Louis Schmidt, to continue his schooling.

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## Louis Riel - Montréal

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Setting out on June 1, 1858, in the company of the Reverend Sister Valade, they travelled for five weeks before eventually arriving in Montreal on July 5. In Montréal, Louis was admitted to the Collège de Montréal run by the Gentlemen of St. Sulpice, where he embarked upon an eight year classical course of studies, which included Latin, Greek, French, English, Philology and the Sciences. Louis proved himself to be an excellent student and, once he had caught up, placed himself at the top of his class. He was overwhelmed with grief by the death of his beloved father, in January 1864, whom he had not seen since leaving Red River. Although he continued his studies, his instructors found that his attitude had changed. They began to question whether Louis really had a religious vocation. In March 1865, finding its regulations too restrictive, he left the Collège de Montréal. He requested and was granted permission to continue his schooling as a day student while living with the Grey Nuns. After breaking the rules several times and repeatedly missing class, he was asked to leave both the Collège and the convent.

The world that faced him as he left the Collège was fraught with intense political activity. Nationalism was at the fore, ultramontanism and federalism were clashing and the issue of Confederation was being hotly debated. During this period, he lived with his aunt, Lucie Riel, the wife of John Lee, and managed to find employment in the law office of Rodolphe Laflamme, an anti-confederate and an anticleric. He fell in love with Marie Julie Guernon and even signed a marriage contract. However, this romance was quickly broken off as Marie's parents were opposed to their daughter marrying a Métis. Disappointed, Riel made his way to Chicago and St. Paul. It would appear that he lived for a while with the poet Louis Fréchette and a group of exiled French Canadian nationalists. It would also appear that he worked briefly for Edouard Langevin or Gilbert Lachance before returning to Manitoba. He arrived in St. Boniface on July 26, 1868, after an absence of ten years, an educated but unemployed young man. He was far from suspecting that within a short while he would become the defender of Métis rights and the future father of Manitoba.

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## Louis Riel - Back home

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At the time of his return to 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 all the way to the Rocky Mountains, belonged to the Hudson's Bay Company. The Company appointed a governor and council to administer the Settlement situated at the junction of the Red and the Assiniboine Rivers. Fort Garry lay at the heart of the Settlement, referred to as the District of Assiniboia, and was the headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company.

During the 1850's, the Métis had succeeded in breaking the fur trade monopoly that the Company had held until then. The Company had been forced to concede a political role in governing the Settlement and certain property rights to the Métis. The years between 1850 and 1860 marked the end of the old way of life in the North-West. Before 1849, changes in the Settlement had occurred because of internal events, but after 1850 they would be the result of external factors, centred around Canadian and American politics.

With its east-west axis of development, Canada was inevitably bound to come into contact with Métis society. The first clash occurred in 1857 when the Dawson-Hind exploration expedition arrived to study the land. The expedition recommended that the Canadian government acquire the arable part of the Company's land. At the same time, an annexationist movement in the United States threatened future occupation of the Territories. Canada could not count on any military action to thwart this movement and the Company did not have any force at its disposal to ward off this threat. The only remaining alternative was annexation of the North-West Territories by Canada. In 1869, a unique opportunity presented itself, for the Hudson's Bay Company agreed to

sell this territory to Canada. It was at this point in time that Louis Riel returned to the settlement he had not seen for ten years.

Many changes had taken place in the Settlement since his departure. With the arrival of numerous settlers from Ontario, Fort Garry had become an active commercial centre. For economic and political reasons, these "Canadians" were opposed to the Company's authority, while the Métis were worried about the future under the Canadian government. They were afraid the country would be invaded by people from Ontario and that this would create a problem for the Métis, since these newcomers would be English-speaking Protestants, unlike the French-speaking Métis who were Catholic. In addition to the problems of language and religion, they were justifiably afraid of losing their lands, for most of the Métis were squatters or settlers without title.

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## Louis Riel and the Métis

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During the summer of 1869, the Canadian government sent John Stoughton Dennis to Red River to survey the land. He was so badly received by the Métis that he started surveying at Oak Point rather than Fort Garry. To add to the Métis' anxiety, the survey was being carried out in accordance with the Ontario style of survey, in squares, instead of the system of long, narrow lots with river frontage used by the Métis. The new system cut across properties already in existence. Moreover, surveying had begun before the land had been officially transferred to Canada. When Dennis arrived in Fort Garry, opposition broke out. On October 11, 1869, proclaiming that the Canadian government had no right to act without permission, sixteen Métis led by Louis Riel stopped a crew of surveyors on the property of Louis' cousin André Nault. This was a very important incident, first of all, because it was the first act of resistance to the transfer of the Settlement to Canada and secondly, because it established Louis Riel as the champion of the Métis. [A commemorative plaque was placed by the City of Winnipeg in the Don Smith Park, corner of Scurfield Blvd and Fleetwood Road, Whyte Ridge.]

In October, William McDougall, who had been appointed Lieutenant Governor of Rupert's Land, set out for Red River to take possession of the North-West Territory for Canada, accompanied by a ready-made government and armed with 300 rifles. When news of this reached the Métis, they decided to organize their 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 the Committee. To strengthen their position, the Métis erected a barricade where the trail from Pembina crossed the La Salle River, a place McDougall had to pass.

Riel's initiative raised opposition from the conservative wing in the Settlement and those in administrative positions. As a result of pressure exerted by them Riel was summoned to appear before the Council of Assiniboia, chaired by Judge Black. The latter was replacing the ailing out-going Governor Mactavish.

Riel let it be known that he was opposed to McDougall's arrival and invited the English group to join him. He stressed that he remained faithful to the British Crown but that he objected to the unlawful entry into the West of the Canadian government. He believed that the West should have the right to negotiate the terms of its entry into Confederation. On October 30, McDougall, Cameron and Joseph-Alfred Norbert Provencher, the nephew of Bishop Provencher, arrived in Pembina where they read the Committee's note. However, they refused to heed this warning and the next day, Cameron and Provencher proceeded to St. Norbert where they were stopped and conducted back to the American border escorted by 30 Métis. On November 2, McDougall met with the same fate. Riel and the Métis thus succeeded in cutting McDougall off from the group in Winnipeg which favoured Canadian annexation. That same day, the Métis took possession of Fort Garry, thereby establishing their control over the surrounding area. However, their power was quite precarious as they could only rely on the support of the French Catholic population. Riel was aware that he would need the backing of all elements in the Settlement to negotiate with the Canadian government. A series of meetings was held to endeavour to foster this support, but without the hoped-for success. Several people objected to the way McDougall had been treated. However, agreement was reached on the preparation of a list of rights.

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## Louis Riel - Provisional Government

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On November 23, Riel proposed the formation of a provisional government to replace the Council of Assiniboia. This surprised the English-speaking Metis who asked for a few days' adjournment for consultation, not believing that their mandate empowered them to make such a decision. The official transfer of the land to Canada had been set for December 1, 1869. During this period, Sir John A. Macdonald had postponed payment to the Company because of the disturbances in the Settlement.

On December 1, McDougall, who had not been notified of this, read the proclamation announcing the transfer of the Company's territories to Canada. This hasty gesture was later to cause problems. From that moment, Riel's Provisional Government became legitimate, for the Company lost all authority as of December 1 and Canada acquired none since it had not paid anything.

On December 10, Riel's Provisional Government's flag flew on the flag pole at Fort Garry. On December 27, following John Bruce's resignation, Louis Riel became president of the Provisional Government. To this point in time, the Canadian government had been unaware of all the problems at Red River. Macdonald now sent a special commissioner to explain his government's position to the Métis.

On December 27, Donald Smith, the Hudson's Bay Company's representative in Canada and a government agent, arrived in the Settlement. A meeting which began on January 19, 1870 attracted upwards of 1,000 people. During the meetings on January 19 and 20, Smith made it known that his government had fundamentally good intentions with respect to the people of the Red River Settlement. In order to find a way of negotiating their rights with Ottawa, Riel proposed that another convention of 20 French-speaking and 20 English-speaking representatives be called to draw up a new list of rights.

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## Louis Riel - Thomas Scott

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On January 9, 1870, 12 prisoners including Charles Mair and Thomas Scott escaped from the Fort. On January 23, John Schultz managed to escape as well. On February 12, Riel freed the other prisoners on the condition that they not interfere with the politics in the Settlement. This initiative cooled the ardour of many, but the "Canadian" party continued its march on Fort Garry.

On February 18, Major Charles Boulton and his men, passing near the Fort, were arrested by Riel's men, 48 were captured, including Thomas Scott. Major Boulton was tried and sentenced to death, but the sentence was never carried out. After causing problems and attempting to escape, Thomas Scott was summoned to appear before a Métis court martial formed in accordance with the custom of the buffalo hunt and presided over by Ambroise Lépine, Louis Riel's lieutenant. The seven members of the court found him guilty of defying the authority of the Provisional Government, of fighting with the guards and insulting the President.

He was sentenced to death by a vote of five to two and the next day, March 4, 1870, he was executed by a firing squad. Although pressure was brought to bear on Riel to prevent the execution, he refused to be swayed. We can only wonder what motives prompted Riel to allow Scott's execution.

Was it an act of vengeance against Scott or fear of losing the respect of the Métis? Scott was an Orangeman who was fiercely anti-Catholic and Riel perhaps believed he would make an example of him. Whatever the real motive, this action excited much controversy. It forced Riel into exile and shook even his most ardent supporters.

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## Louis Riel - The Birth of Manitoba

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On March 24, the three delegates left for Ottawa to negotiate the terms of entry into Confederation with the representatives of the Canadian government. Father Ritchot became the real spokesman for the delegation, as Judge Black and Alfred Scott showed themselves to be relatively ineffective. With relentless questioning and arguing, he was able to convince the government to introduce the Manitoba Bill into the House of Commons.

On May 12, 1870, the Manitoba Act, based on the Métis "List of Rights," was passed by the Canadian Parliament. One section protected Métis' lands and guaranteed the right to their religion and to the use of their language in the Legislature and the courts.

Riel, as head of the Provisional Government, was to maintain peace and order while awaiting the arrival of the first lieutenant governor, Adams G. Archibald, and Colonel Wolseley's troops, which were accompanying him.

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## Louis Riel flees to the U.S.A.

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Wolseley's troops arrived before Archibald, and although they were supposed to restore order and keep the peace, a number of the soldiers wanted to seek out Riel and avenge the death of Scott. Warned of their intentions, Riel, Lépine and William O'Donoghue, an Irish American, had time to flee to sanctuary in the United States.

Riel went to the Métis settlement of St. Joseph, in Dakota Territory, to await news from Red River. A letter arrived shortly thereafter from Bishop Taché which suggested that he remain in hiding, for his life would be in danger if he returned. The situation was serious; disputes between the Métis and Wolseley's men were growing in number.

Riel found it difficult to remain far away in hiding and on September 17, he returned to attend a gathering of the Métis in St. Norbert. At this meeting, it was resolved that a petition be sent to the President of the United States, Ulysses S. Grant, to ask him to intercede with the Queen for an investigation of their demand for amnesty. O'Donoghue wanted annexation of the Settlement to the United States, but Riel opposed the idea. However, O'Donoghue was selected to carry the petition to the President and it was turned over to him. On the way, O'Donoghue inserted a request for annexation which did not convince Grant and he rejected it. O'Donoghue then went to New York where he met with some Irish Fenians who had already made forays into Canada. He managed to convince them to make a raid into Manitoba. When news of this reached Manitoba, Lieutenant Governor Archibald was very concerned. Would the Métis join in the raid?

At this moment Louis Riel intervened. Believing that the Métis' future lay with Canada, not with the United States, he assured the Lieutenant Governor that the Métis would not join the Fenians and he kept his word. For want of local support, the Fenian attack died before it had begun. Grateful for the assistance that Riel had provided, Archibald was prepared to leave him in peace. However, this feeling was not shared by all and Archibald came to believe that peace would be restored more quickly if Riel left the country for a while. Riel and Lépine were each offered the sum of \$1,000. They reluctantly accepted this amount, more as a result of threats on their lives than because of the money. Riel and Lépine left Manitoba on February 23, 1872 and travelled to St. Joseph bound for St. Paul, Minnesota.

Bounty hunters pursued them constantly. Nevertheless, Riel and Lépine were soon homesick. Lépine was the first to return to Red River in May 1872. The following month, Riel made his way to St. Joseph where he began to campaign as a candidate in the federal election for the Manitoba constituency of Provencher. He persisted in this, despite the advice of his friends, and only eventually withdrew in favour of George-Etienne Cartier, who had been defeated in his own riding. He believed that Cartier would defend the Métis cause. Cartier, however, died a few months later and Louis was subsequently elected by acclamation in a by-election for Provencher held in October 1873. Arrangements were made for Riel to take his seat in the House of Commons, but fearing for his life, Louis lost his nerve and fled to Montreal and upstate New York. The February 13, 1874, general election saw Riel re-elected member of parliament for Provencher. On March 30th, he entered the parliament building, took the required oath of allegiance, signed the member's roll and hurriedly left the building again in the direction of Montreal. On April 9, Riel was expelled from the House of Commons. He returned to St. Paul and then to Keeseville, New York, where he lived with Father Fabien Barnabé. In September 1874, a by-election was called to fill the vacant seat in Provencher. Riel was again re-elected 'in-absentia' but this time he did not attempt to take his seat. In 1875, the new prime minister, Alexander Mackenzie, granted Riel amnesty for the troubles in 1869-70, on condition that he not return to Canada for five years. Exile was a time of anguish for Louis.

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# Louis Riel - The Exile

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He was often depressed and claimed that he had visions of a mission to fulfill. His cries and lamentations so frightened Father Barnabé that he sent for Riel's uncle, John Lee. The latter took him back to Montréal and he was confined to an asylum in the Province of Quebec, under the name of Louis R. David. Shortly thereafter, he was transferred to the asylum at Beauport where he gradually recovered his health. He was discharged from the asylum in January 1878, with the recommendation that he avoid excitement.

From Beauport, Riel returned to Keeseville where he remained for a while. During this time, he fell in love with Evelina Barnabé, Father Barnabé's sister. Less interested in politics now, 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 came to an end.

In the fall of 1878, Riel returned once again to St. Joseph, near Pembina where in April 1879, he was visited by his mother and his friends.

Life in Manitoba had changed a great deal. The influx of immigrants was driving the Métis away. Stripped of their land and their way of life, they 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.

While these changes were taking place, Riel was living in the United States, for he was still banished from Manitoba. Since 1879, he had followed the buffalo hunt and worked as an agent, trader and woodcutter near Carroll, in Montana Territory. Here he met Marguerite Monet dite Bellehumeur, a Métisse whom he married 'à la façon du pays' on April 28, 1881, and solemnly on March 9, 1882.

Riel began to take an interest in American politics and became an American citizen. When his term of exile ended, he paid a brief visit to his mother, then returned to live in the United States where he became a schoolmaster in order 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 only sporadically and preferring to follow the hunt.

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## Louis Riel - The Return

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On June 4, as Mass was ending in St. Peter's Mission on the Sun River (Montana), Riel received a visit from four Métis, Gabriel Dumont, Moïse Ouellette, Michel Dumas and James Isbister, who had come to ask Louis to lead the Métis once again. They had traveled from northern Saskatchewan where several Métis families had settled after 1869. There the Métis had resumed their traditional way of life, now threatened by the influx of settlers and immigrants. Their borders were again disappearing, their rights were no longer being respected, their lands were being taken and the government was not listening.

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 fifteen years, he was returning to Canada. These years had strongly marked him, for, exiled from his native land and pursued by bounty hunters, he had suffered a nervous breakdown. Now he saw the opportunity to claim his rights and those of his brethren from the Canadian government.

Louis set out for Batoche with his wife and two children, arriving there around the beginning of July 1884. On July 8, about six days after his arrival, he addressed the Métis. His programme was a moderate one, directed as much towards the Indians and the white settlers as to the Métis.

All three groups responded warmly to his presence. Each group was to retain its independence, but a central committee was to be set up to formulate specific demands to be sent to Ottawa. A decision had been made to send petitions to Ottawa on behalf of the people, in the hope that the government would listen. Several of Riel's supporters would have preferred bolder action, for the Indians and the Métis were dying of hunger and the European settlers were anxious to have the land issue resolved.

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## Louis Riel - Batoche

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On December 16, 1884, after several public meetings had been held, a petition was dispatched to Ottawa. It demanded that the settlers be given title to the lands they then occupied, that the districts of Saskatchewan, Assiniboia and Alberta be granted provincial status, that 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, an anti-Riel feeling prevailed among the Catholic clergy. The clergy 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 André, the clergy tried to oust Riel as the Métis leader, but were unsuccessful.

On February 11, 1885, the federal government answered the petition that had been sent on December 16 of the previous year. The government promised to appoint a commission to investigate the Métis' claims and titles. The first step would be to take a census of the Métis in the North-West Territories. These proposals angered the Métis who were hoping for a quicker solution to their problems. Seeing that nothing had been accomplished yet, 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 a leader and a prophet.

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## Louis Riel - The Rebellion

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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. As of 1885, the Indians realized that their situation was similar to that of the Métis. Thus it was altogether natural that they 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 the first president and Gabriel Dumont was chosen adjutant-general. However, following the formation of the Provisional Government, Riel became aware that his authority was becoming weaker; 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. Riel found himself again supported only by the French-speaking Métis and the Indians. He decided to capture Fort Carlton which he considered essential to his operations. He wanted to occupy it without violence, but the Mounted Police reinforced its garrison. Thus Riel could only negotiate or attack. Opting for negotiation, Riel sent Charles Nolin and Ambroise Lépine to demand that Major Crozier surrender the fort to him. In return he would let Crozier and his men go free. There was no time to conclude the negotiations since fighting broke out at Duck Lake on March 26.

Major Crozier had left Fort Carlton with 56 Mounted Policemen and 41 civilian volunteers to stop Riel. Led by Gabriel Dumont, the Métis met them at Duck Lake. Dumont succeeded in drawing the troops into a valley where Crozier was forced to come to a halt. Two horsemen, Isidore Dumont and Falling Sand, a Cree Chief, came forward to meet them. Believing they wished to parley, Crozier also advanced, accompanied by a guide named McKay. All 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. The battle of Duck Lake had begun. After forty minutes, with his force decimated, Crozier gave the order to retreat. Seventeen members of the government force had been killed and several were wounded in the battle. Further casualties were avoided when Riel intervened to prevent Dumont from pursuing and killing all the retreating soldiers.

This battle made the Indians and Métis realize that the Canadians were not invincible. Soon war whoops and cries of revenge rang out among the Indian tribes. Two hundred Cree Indians attacked Battleford and Fort Pitt, killing 6. At Frog Lake, Wandering Spirit and his Indians murdered the Indian agent, Thomas Quinn and two priests, Father Fafard and Father Marchand. The Frog Lake incident prompted the Canadian government to intervene. Up until this time, John A. Macdonald had not taken events in the West seriously, but the Frog Lake massacre quickly caught his attention. The government took two measures; the first was to increase the

amount of money provided to the Indians for food. This was a wise decision for, their hunger satisfied, some of the Indians remained on the reserves. The second measure was to mobilize a military force of 5,000 men under the command of Major-General Frederick Dobson Middleton. Thanks to the newly-built railroad, the troops were in Winnipeg 10 days after the battle at Duck Lake. Three columns of troops were then dispatched to the centres of disturbance in Saskatchewan.

Gabriel Dumont and 350 Métis were to defend Batoche. Dumont believed that the only effective way of accomplishing this was through "Indian warfare," attacking quickly by surprise than immediately withdrawing. Riel was opposed to this plan. He wanted to avoid violence as long as possible, in the hope of carrying negotiations through to a successful conclusion. This attitude had disastrous consequences for the Métis, as it enabled Middleton to advance to Batoche in safety. Dumont then decided to set a trap for him at Fish Creek. On April 24, Riel and Dumont set out from Batoche with 200 Métis. As they arrived at Fish Creek, Riel changed his mind and wanted the Métis to return to Batoche. At that moment a messenger brought word to them that a Mounted Police detachment was approaching Batoche from the direction of Qu'Appelle. Dumont sent 50 men back to defend the settlement, under Riel's leadership. With Gabriel Dumont in command, the battle of Fish Creek ended in a stalemate which the Métis regarded as a victory because they had succeeded in checking the Canadians' advance.

Meanwhile, in Batoche, Riel was beginning to have doubts about the decisions he had made. Reports indicated that troops had arrived in the vicinity of Batoche. In despair, he appealed to Poundmaker and Big Bear for help, but they would not arrive in time.

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## Louis Riel - The Surrender

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Cautious after Fish Creek, Middleton stopped for two weeks to rest his men. He left for Batoche on May 7, accompanied by the steamer "Northcote" which he planned to use in launching an attack from the Saskatchewan River. The Métis soon managed to disable the steamer, but the government troops were too strong.

On May 12, the fourth day of the battle, the Métis were defeated. The two leaders reacted differently to this defeat. Both were hidden in the woods and ravines around Batoche. Riel, after ensuring the safety of his family, withdrew into the woods to pray. He made no attempt to flee. When Middleton demanded that he surrender, he replied that he would give himself up to fulfill 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, on the other hand, tried unsuccessfully to recapture Batoche. Hearing that Riel had given himself up, he fled to the United States with Michel Dumas.

The resistance was over. Poundmaker surrendered on May 23, but Big Bear was still at large. He was attempting to restore the unity which had existed on the plains.

On May 26, he engaged Colonel Strange's men in battle, but, with his braves dying of hunger and no more ammunition left, Big Bear finally gave himself up on July 2.

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## Louis Riel - The Trial

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On July 6, 1885, Riel was charged with high treason.

The trial opened on July 20, with Riel pleading not guilty. This trial was to have disastrous consequences for Riel and for Canada. The jury was entirely Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. Riel's lawyer wanted to plead that Riel was insane and not responsible for his acts. Riel was so opposed to this strategy that his lawyers had the judge rule that he did not have permission to speak.



The lawyers were not allowed to speak of the grievances which had led to the rebellion, as the judge declared that it was Riel, not the Government of Canada, who was on trial. The witnesses' testimonies were damning. They insisted that Riel had been mentally unstable before and during the rebellion. Towards the end of the trial, Riel was allowed to speak.

After a moment of prayer, he reviewed the troubles in the North-West, beginning 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 that he was cured.

Did visions, prophecies and missions signify insanity? He closed with a few eloquent comments on the sacrifices he had made and asked for justice.

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## The death of Louis Riel

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On July 21, the court was adjourned for one week to allow enough time for the witnesses to appear. The examination of the witnesses began on July 28 and continued through to August 1.

Riel was sentenced to hang on September 18. Then a series of appeals began. The first one was to the Manitoba Court of Queen's Bench which affirmed the original sentence on September 2. The appeal succeeded, however, in having the execution postponed until October 16.

A second appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council was dismissed and the execution was set for November 10. Macdonald, uncertain what decision to make, yielded to pressure from Ontario and Quebec and granted a third reprieve to enable a medical commission to examine Riel.

When the commission was unable to pronounce him insane, the date of execution was set for November 16. While awaiting death, Riel received a visit from his family and on November 6, he wrote his will.

During the night of the 15th and the early hours of the 16th, he wrote one last letter to his mother and received the last rites. At 8:00 a.m., he climbed the stairs to the scaffold for his execution.

On November 19, a service was sung for the repose of his soul at St. Mary's Church in Regina. On December 9, his body was returned to St. Vital where it lay in state for 2 days in his mother's house. A requiem mass was sung December 12 at St. Boniface Cathedral and his body was buried in the churchyard.

Thus lived and died a man whom we acknowledge today as the founder of the Province of Manitoba and defender of the rights of the Métis and of French Canadians.

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## Further Reading

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For images visit the site [University of Manitoba's Red River Cartes de visites](#).

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