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### *Louis Riel – Martyr, hero or traitor?*

Louis Riel was born October 22, 1844 on a farmstead at the juncture of the Red and Seine rivers, present day Winnipeg. He was hung as a traitor on November 16, 1885. During those 41 years Riel would help found two Canadian provinces, find identity for the Metis people and shake up the status quo of Canada.

Louis Riel was branded a traitor to Canada – but he was no traitor. He was a patriot who stood up for his people and his beliefs. He was also a victim of prevailing prejudices of his time.

In November of 1869 Riel, as a leader of the Metis people and the territory of Red River, spearheaded the writing of a List of Rights preceding the entry of Manitoba into confederation. These rights were not the musings of a revolutionary – but rather that of a democrat. Understand that at the time the French-speakers (as they were called) and the French-speaking Metis were very much in the majority in the Territory.

In part the List of Rights included:

- ☞ That the people have the right to elect their own legislature.
- ☞ That all sheriffs, magistrates, constable, school commissioners, etc. be elected by the people.
- ☞ That English and French were to be commonly used by the government.
- ☞ That all documents and Acts of the legislature be published in English and French.
- ☞ That (the Territory) have a fair and full representation in the Canadian Parliament.
- ☞ That all privileges, customs and usage existing at the time of the transfer be respected.

There was at this time in the territory, however, a group of transplanted Loyalists who saw these acts as treason. And they had the ear of the Government of Canada. The Government procrastinated on accepting the List of Rights.

In frustration at the lack of action from Canada and in response to a transfer of the territory from Hudson's Bay Company, Riel established a temporary (Provisional) government to fill a perceived governance void.

Part of the reason for the establishment of the temporary Government was a response to pressures from the United States for the territory to become part of the Union. Riel fought against the Americans and helped bring, what was to be later called, Manitoba into confederation with Canada.

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However good and well-intentioned the Provisional Government was, it was seen as a revolution by the Government of Canada.

It was also seen as thus to a group of Orangemen originally from Upper Canada. A group of these men took their revenge on Riel and his Provisional Government by trying to overthrow it.

Thomas Scott, a violent and racist man and one of the persons attempting the overthrow, was caught and charged with treason. After a lengthy trial (which seems to have been more democratic than Riel's own trial!) Scott was found guilty and executed by a firing squad.

**Thomas Scott**



For his part in the creation of the Provisional Government (and partially for the death of Scott), Riel was branded a traitor himself. He was promised an amnesty by the Prime Minister of Canada but it never came. In 1875 Riel was banished to the US for five years.

Banishment was not easy on Riel. Cut off from his country and his people he lapsed into deep states of depression mixed with states of utter euphoria. He began to talk about encounters with the "Divine Spirit" and believing himself to be a prophet of the New World. Riel was smuggled by friends across the border and on March 6, 1876, he was committed to an asylum in Quebec.

Some say that Riel was suffering delusions. Some say that Riel was acting crazy for his own purposes. Whatever the truth, Louis was treated as insane for almost two years and finally released January 29, 1878.

In June 1883, Riel decided to return to Manitoba. Finding only menial work and an uncomfortable environment, he uprooted his family and moved to Batoche, Saskatchewan. In Batoche he was greeted as a hero by the Metis who had relocated to the area from Winnipeg when immigration from the east had made them a minority.

The Prime Minister of the day was John A. MacDonald. He was not considered a good friend of the people of the prairies. There was even secession talk. The idea of the West forming a new country with Manitoba, the North West Territories and British Columbia was a big topic of the day. Combine this with the widespread starvation and scurvy epidemic which affected the west in 1883 – 84 and you just knew that something was going to happen. And John A. didn't help matters any when, in response to the pleas for food, he sent in more police.

On March 5, 1885, Riel met with 10 other Metis and swore an oath to: "... to... save our country from a wicked government by taking up arms (if necessary)." From here it all went downhill.



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It all seemed to boil to a head at a place called Duck Lake. Here some of Riel's compatriots (but apparently not Riel) had a confrontation with the local constabulary. A number of police were killed and captured.

On March 29, the Stoney Indians shot and killed a government teacher who refused to give them food for their starving tribe. On March 30, the Cree, similarly hungry and frustrated, sacked the fort at Battleford. On April 2, nine whites were killed by Indians during an attack on Fort Pitt.

In all this Riel was seen by the Metis and the Indians as the "spiritual leader". And the government of Canada saw Riel as a trouble maker, a zealot and a traitor.

By May 15, it was all over. The armies and police of Canada had put down the revolt and a shoeless Louis Riel surrendered his freedom to the police. He was transferred to Regina and charged with high treason.

In a trial which lasted two weeks Riel was found guilty. His lawyers appealed of course but to no avail. Riel's fate was sealed.

November 16, 1885 at around 8:30 AM. Louis was led to the gallows – the trap door snapped open – and Riel was dead.

Was Louis Riel a hero and martyr or a criminal? Even after 100 years the jury is still out, although it leans towards Riel as a bonafide Father of Confederation or, at least, a patriot.

We encourage you to read more about Louis Riel. Understand him. Understand the time in which he lived. Come to your own conclusion!

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**Riel Assignment: Respond Questions**

1) In Riel's LIST OF RIGHTS, which two do you feel had the most impact on Canadian identity? Why do you feel this way? Explain.

2) As an American citizen, should Riel have been charged with treason? And ultimately hanged? Explain.

3) After learning about Riel, do you feel he was a hero or a traitor? Explain your answer using specific evidence from class notes, the film we watched, or another source.

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<p><b>Ideas</b></p> <p>____x 2</p> <hr/> <p>10</p>	5	Thorough summary of data.
	4	Clear and specific summary of data
	3	Somewhat clear and specific summary of data
	2	Generalized or superficial summary of data
	1	Very generalized or superficial summary of data
<p><b>Relevance of Information</b></p> <p>____x2</p> <hr/> <p>10</p>	5	Information is specific, appropriate and thoughtfully selected
	4	Information is relevant and appropriate
	3	Information is somewhat relevant and appropriate
	2	Information is irrelevant and/or illogical
	1	Information is very irrelevant and/or illogical
<p><b>Understanding of Text</b></p> <p>____x 2</p> <hr/> <p>10</p>	5	Provides specific evidence that demonstrates close familiarity with and understanding of material.
	4	Provides specific evidence that demonstrates familiarity with and understanding of material.
	3	Provides some specific evidence that demonstrates familiarity with and understanding of material.
	2	May provide some evidence that demonstrates familiarity with and understanding of material

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