

Seven Oaks: Battle? Massacre? Incident?

The word *massacre* is emotionally charged, as it often brings about images of mass murder, carnage, and the slaughter of innocent human beings. For generations, the word *massacre* was used to describe what happened at Seven Oaks on June 19, 1816, where one Métis and twenty-one HBC representatives died.

If the reverse had occurred—twenty-one Métis and one HBC casualty—would it have been recorded as a massacre?

History, according to Sir Winston Churchill, former British prime minister, is written by the winners. In the past, historians have portrayed the Métis as the aggressors. The Métis were depicted as firing the first shots and mutilating the bodies of the dead afterward. Research and objectivity have shown that what transpired was quite different: it is unlikely that the Métis fired the first shot or that any bodies were disfigured.

The Métis were cleared of any wrongdoings by an investigative report prepared by William Bachelor Coltman in 1818. In “A General Statement and Report Relative to the Disturbances in the Indian Territories of British North America,” Coltman

- condemned all protagonists for the violence at Red River
- refused to support the legal position of the HBC that claimed they had official rights to the Selkirk colony area
- overtly sympathized with the NWC
- proclaimed that the Métis were not the aggressors in the battle

- stated that it was very unlikely that the Métis fired the first shot

Over time, the Seven Oaks *Massacre* became known as the Seven Oaks *Battle*. Today, the *Canadian Encyclopedia* calls it the Seven Oaks *Incident*. Other sources describe the event as a result of the accidental interception of the Métis by the HBC men and blame the event on the intense rivalry between the HBC and the NWC.

Although the casualty count at Seven Oaks has not changed, how we view the event has shifted dramatically.



Figure 5-17 The Battle of Seven Oaks, 1816, by C. W. Jefferys (1869–1951).