

Louis Riel (1844-1885): Biography

Louis Riel, Métis leader and martyr, was born in St. Boniface, Red River Settlement (later Winnipeg, Manitoba) on October 22, 1844 to Jean-Louis Riel and Julie Lagimodière. He was the oldest of eleven children. In March 1882, he married Marguerite Monet dit Bellehumeur in Carroll, Montana Territory. The couple had two children: Jean (May 1882) and Angèlique (September 1883). After arguably the most politically explosive trial in Canadian history, he was executed for High Treason on November 16, 1885.

Louis Riel led the Métis in two resistances during 1869-70 in Red River and in 1885 in the Saskatchewan District of the North-West Territories (present-day central Saskatchewan). Riel had leadership in his blood: his father Jean-Louis organized Métis hunters and traders to bring an end to the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC)'s fur trading monopoly. Guillaume Sayer and three other Métis had been charged with illegal trading. However, on May 17, 1849, the day of their trial, the senior Riel organized an armed group of Métis outside of the courthouse. While the traders were found guilty, the Métis were so intimidating that the HBC Magistrate who presided over the trial let Guillaume and the others go without imposing a fine. This event virtually ended the HBC's monopoly trading monopoly in what is now Western Canada.

Louis Riel did not at first want a life in politics. When he was fourteen, priests sent him and other intelligent Métis boys to Canada East (now Québec) to attend the collège de Montréal. The priests had hoped that the pious young Riel would also become a priest. Upon receiving the news of his father's death (January 21, 1864), however, he left the collège de Montréal, and began working at the Montréal law firm of Rudolphe Laflamme. In 1868, the 24 year-old decided to return home to the Red River Settlement.

Louis Riel returned home to lead the Métis' resistance against the Dominion of Canada's annexation of Rupert's Land. Canada had purchased Rupert's Land (all of the present-day Prairie Provinces, plus northern Ontario and Québec and parts of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut) from the HBC without consulting any of the territory's Aboriginal inhabitants. The Métis were angry because they felt as the Indigenous residents of the region, they should have a say in their future. Therefore, they resisted this annexation.

From October 1869 until May 1870, Riel took effective control of the Métis resistance, eventually becoming the President of the Provisional Government. Riel proved such a skilled negotiator that the federal government relented and created *The Manitoba Act*. The act, which created the new province of Manitoba, was based partially on "The Bill of Rights" which Riel co-drafted and included measures for bilingual public and educational institutions (section 22) and mechanisms to deal with the Métis Aboriginal rights through the individual extinguishments of their "Indian" title to land (sections 31 and 32).

Despite his efforts to bring Manitoba into Confederation, Louis Riel was forced into political exile. He was not safe because, on March 4, 1870, he had Thomas Scott, an Orangeman who hated Francophones and Roman Catholics, executed. As a result, a bounty was put on his head. Riel therefore fled to the United States and arrived in St. Joseph, Montana Territory on August 24, 1870, staying there until early 1871. When word reached him that his mother was sick, he returned to St. Vital, Manitoba and stayed with her until the fall of 1871. That fall there was an attempted Fenian invasion of Manitoba. In response, Riel offered to raise a Métis force to repel the American invaders. Manitoba's Lieutenant Governor Archibald praised Riel for his loyalty; however, in Parliament, Edward Blake, a member from Ontario and future federal Liberal leader, offered \$5,000 for the capture of anyone involved in Thomas Scott's execution. Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald asked Riel and Maxime Lépine, the Métis' Adjutant-General (military leader) during the Red River Resistance, to leave the country and offered them \$1,000 for sustenance, under the condition that they stay out of Canada for five years. On February 23, 1872, the two men left for St. Paul, Minnesota.

Riel did not stay out of Canada for very long. He returned to Manitoba to run for the federal constituency of Provencher. However, he was persuaded not to participate in the election and was promised an amnesty if he let Sir George Cartier, who lost his seat in Québec, run in Provencher. Cartier was elected but he soon became ill and died. Therefore, Riel ran in a by-election in 1873, and twice in 1874, and was elected all three times. He

qualified for his seat by signing the Test Roll in Parliament. However, because of the reward offered by Blake, he was never able to take it.

From the mid-1870s until the mid-1880s, Riel spent most of his time in exile in the United States. Afraid for his life, Riel spent 1874-75 travelling. While staying in Keeseville, New York, with Father Barnabé, he suffered severe insomnia and had a near nervous collapse. On March 6, 1876, Riel's uncle, John Lee and Father Lachapelle committed their young charge to an insane asylum in Longue Pointe, a suburb of Montréal, under the name "Louis R. David". In May 1876, Riel was transferred to an asylum in Beauport, Québec and was discharged on January 23, 1878. He returned to live quietly with Father Barnabé for several months and in April 1878 he became engaged to the priest's sister, Evelina. However, the romance did not end in marriage. Riel then travelled to a Métis settlement in Sun River, Montana Territory, where he worked as a buffalo hunter and trader. During this time he married Marguerite and became a teacher and took a position at the nearby St. Peter's Mission to support his family. Riel was working there when three Métis visitors from Batoche arrived.

It was decided at a meeting held in the Lindsay schoolhouse (near Batoche) in May 1884 that Louis Riel's help was needed to address the Métis' grievances with the federal government. Louis Riel was educated and articulate and was widely recognized by the Métis as the person most responsible for bringing Manitoba into Confederation. Therefore, a delegation consisting of Gabriel Dumont, James Isbister, Moise Ouellette, and Michel Dumas were chosen to go to the Montana Territory to bring Louis Riel

back to Canada. After three weeks of travelling, Louis Riel and his family arrived at Fish Creek, North-West Territories (in present-day central Saskatchewan). The next day, they went to Batoche and stayed with Riel's cousin, Charles Nolin, where they would live for four months.

That summer, various residents of the Saskatchewan District of the North-West Territories assembled to discuss their collective grievances with the federal government. The Métis were concerned about the lack of permanent title to their land and were frustrated by the federal government's failure to respond to their numerous petitions regarding this matter. The non-Aboriginal farmers did not like low wheat prices, high freight rates, and the tariffs that inflated the price of machinery. They were also upset that the Canadian Pacific Railway bypassed their settlements by hundreds of kilometres. Riel and William Henry Jackson, later known as Honoré Jaxon, drafted a final petition outlining the farmers' and Métis' grievances to the government in December 1884. They did not get the desired response so Riel took more drastic measures.

Riel chaired a meeting on March 5, 1885, in which a resolution was passed that stated that the Métis would take up arms if necessary. Joseph Ouellette, Gabriel Dumont, Pierre Gariépy, Isidore Dumont, John Ross, Philippe Gariépy, Auguste Laframboise, Moïse Ouellette, Calixte Lafontaine, and Napoleon Nault signed this resolution. At this point, with talk of possible armed insurrection, the non-Aboriginal farmers abandoned their alliance with the Métis. Riel's next meeting was on March 8, in which he put forth a motion to create a provisional government. However, it was not

formed at this time. A "Bill of Rights", similar to what the Métis had drawn-up at Red River in 1869, was also drafted at this meeting.

The Métis resistance formally started as a result of the activities of a non-Aboriginal agitator. On March 18, Lawrence Clarke, the HBC's chief factor at Fort Carlton, arrived back from Ottawa stating that the federal government was sending 500 soldiers to Batoche in answer to the Métis' most recent petition. After hearing this, the Métis formed a provisional government. Riel then appointed Gabriel Dumont as its Adjutant-General (military leader). Riel decided that the Métis' first move in response to the possibility of the Canadian government using the military to quash Métis dissent was the non-violent capture of Fort Carlton. The North-West Mounted Police, however, had just reinforced the fort. Charles Nolin and Ambroise Lépine were sent to negotiate with Major Crozier, whereby they told him to surrender the fort in return for his and his men's safe passage. The fighting at Duck Lake broke out before the negotiations could finish.

Louis Riel did not take part in the fighting during the 1885 Resistance. However, he influenced Métis strategy by counselling them to avoid bloodshed whenever possible. For instance, he instructed the Métis not to pursue fleeing mounted police, non-Aboriginal military volunteers and soldiers. At the Battle of Duck Lake (March 26), Gabriel Dumont said that Riel rode on his horse with a crucifix in his hand, but carried no weapons. Riel was in Batoche during the Battle of Fish Creek (April 24). On May 16, a few days after the fall of Batoche (May 12), Riel gave himself up to the English-Métis scout, Thomas Hourie.

On July 6, 1885, Louis Riel was charged with High Treason for his role during the 1885 Resistance. Lieutenant-Colonel Hugh Richardson, the stipendiary magistrate of the North-West Territories was chosen to preside over the trial. (A stipendiary magistrate is a paid political appointee of the federal government). Richardson was then ordered to select a six-man jury, for which he chose six English-speaking Protestants: Walter Merryfield, Henry J. Painter, Francis Cosgrove, Edwin J. Brooks, Pat Deane and Ed Evett. Riel's lawyers included François-Xavier Lemieux, Charles Fitzpatrick, James N. Greenshields, and T.C. Johnstone. Riel's lawyers argued for a twelve-man jury made up with six Anglophones and six Francophones, and for the trial to be moved to an area with provincial status (preferably Manitoba). They further argued that since Riel was no longer a British subject, but was rather an American citizen, trying him under Canadian law would be illegal. (Canada did not have separate citizenship from Great Britain until 1947). Magistrate Richardson disregarded these arguments.

To the charge of High Treason, Louis Riel plead "not guilty". His lawyers had wanted him to plead innocent by reason of insanity; however, Riel refused because he felt that the causes leading to the Resistance would not be recognized if he were found insane. However, numerous people testified against Riel, which made his conviction much easier. Father André testified that it appeared as though Riel was more concerned about money for himself rather than for the Métis' well-being. Dr. François Roy, who had treated Riel at the Beauport Asylum years earlier said that Riel suffered from megalomania (or the deluded belief that you a great person). Also at the

trial, Philippe Garnot, a French-Canadian store owner, who was the secretary of the 1885 Provisional Government, said Riel was insane and that armed Métis forced him to be Riel's secretary. Riel's cousin, Charles Nolin also testified against him. In fact, it was made public during the trial that Nolin received large government contracts before the beginning of the trial. However, despite such an apparent conflict of interest, Nolin's testimony still provided the basis for the jury's decision to convict Riel.

Riel defended himself and the Métis' cause near the end of the trial. In his defence, he was lucid and articulate and argued that he was sane, which demolished his attorneys' insanity defence. Furthermore, he demonstrated that the Resistance began with a police attack on the Métis, and therefore was not started by the Métis who were only defending themselves. He concluded his defence by stating that the Métis sent petitions to have their grievances peacefully dealt with, while the government sent in the police and the army.

After deliberating upon Riel's fate, the jury found him guilty, but recommended clemency, which means to show mercy. Riel's articulate defence of the Métis' cause and the government's mishandling of its dealings with the Métis had swayed the jury. Despite the jury's findings, Magistrate Richardson passed the death sentence on August 1, 1885. An appeal had the execution postponed until October 16 of that year, and a second appeal moved it to November 16, 1885.

Louis Riel's trial inflamed opinion across Canada. Some, mostly in Québec but also in other parts of French Canada, supported Riel, and others,

mainly in Ontario but also in English-speaking areas, wanted him executed. To French Canadians in Québec, Riel, a Francophone and Roman Catholic, represented French Canada and the dream of a bicultural and bilingual country. To Protestant Ontarians and other English Canadians, Riel represented "French domination". They also wanted Riel punished for Thomas Scott's execution by a Métis military tribunal during the Red River Resistance (1869-70). Neither English nor French Canadians attempted to understand the Resistance and Riel's execution from a Métis perspective. In fact, English and French Canada had merely superimposed their own rivalries upon a far away Aboriginal resistance.

Prominent English Canadians who wanted Riel executed included two powerful government officials in Western Canada: Edgar Dewdney, Lieutenant Governor of the North-West Territories, and Hayter Reed, Indian Agent for Battleford. Dewdney said that Riel was "too dangerous a man to have a chance of being let loose on society." Finally, the most powerful political figure in the country, the Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, wanted Riel executed. When pressed on the issue of clemency for Riel, he said: "He shall hang though every dog in Québec bark in his favour." However, not all English Canadians wanted Riel executed: hundreds of letters urging clemency were sent to local papers and many in the Liberal Party led by Wilfrid Laurier opposed the execution on principle, but also to gain political support against the ruling Conservatives.

In the end, all appeals to commute Riel's death sentence were denied. With his confessor Father André at his side, Louis Riel, went to the gallows on

November 16, 1885. He displayed great courage and solemnity throughout this terrible ordeal. Rumours were circulating that Gabriel Dumont had planned to rescue Riel at the execution site in Regina. As a result, extreme measures were taken to ensure the execution would take place as scheduled: 300-armed troops were placed in concentric circles around the prison grounds. However, Dumont did not arrive, and Riel was hung. Years later, one of the jurors, Edwin Brooks stated, "We [the jury] tried Louis Riel for treason but he was hanged for the murder of Thomas Scott."

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