

The Effects of the 1885 Resistance on Central Canada

The 1885 Resistance had a profound impact upon Central Canada and consequently upon the country as a whole. In the short term, feelings towards the Métis during the 1885 Resistance were mixed in Ontario and Québec. Some were sympathetic to the Métis, while others were opposed. Many English Canadians were enthusiastic to volunteer for the Canadian militia in order to crush the Métis resistance, while French Canadians were reluctant because they felt the Métis were being punished for being French and Roman Catholic. Some people in Ontario felt that if the federal government had treated the Métis fairly in the first place, there would not have been a Métis uprising. Regardless of their stance, most people in Central Canada cheered on the troops during what would be the new Dominion of Canada's first military campaign.

As the Resistance was being suppressed, Ontarians and Québécois argued amongst themselves on how the country should develop. English Canadians in Ontario wanted Western Canada to be English-speaking and Protestant, while French Canadians in Québec wanted a bicultural and bilingual west. Each camp, in turn, saw the resistance as actually being fermented by the other linguistic group. For instance, *The Toronto News* reported that the French Canadians, who were using the Métis to build a second Québec on the Prairies, caused the Resistance. A French-Canadian editor in Montréal responded vehemently and wrote that the troops were sent to rid the Northwest of its French population.

The idea that the 1885 Resistance aggravated relations between Anglophones and Francophones was a staple of both the historiography (the body of history and articles written by historians) and school textbooks. Historians such as George F. G. Stanley perpetuated this English-French schism and played upon the idea that the Métis resistances in 1869-70 and 1885 were a clash of civilizations between a "primitive" people (the Métis) and the onward march of progress (read Confederation).

Unfortunately, in 1885, neither English nor French Canadians asked the Métis or First Nations how they would have liked to see the West developed. In the nineteenth century, Canadian society was becoming racist and paternalistic towards people of non-Western European heritage. This racism had its roots in the perversion of Darwin's Theory of Evolution called Social Darwinism, which maintained that western Europeans were a superior people and were thus meant to govern over and assimilate the world's "inferior" indigenous peoples (such as the Métis or the Plains First Nations). Therefore, neither English or French Canadians actually understood that the two Métis resistances in 1869-70 and 1885 were struggles by an Aboriginal people to maintain their way of life and had nothing to do with Ontario's or Québec's place in Confederation.

Nevertheless, prior to his execution, the outpouring of support that Louis Riel received from French Canada was genuine. For instance, more than 1,200 Montréalais sent telegrams to Sir John A. Macdonald to commute Riel's death sentence. In addition, forty-nine petitions with 15,000 signatures, from French Canadians throughout the country, were sent to the

Governor-General pleading for Riel's life. After Riel was executed, French Canadians held protest rallies, burned effigies of federal ministers, and also threatened to burn their homes. In Québec, flags were flown at half-mast, children were sent home from school, businesses were closed, and municipal councils cancelled their meetings. Riel's execution effectively destroyed the Conservative Party in Québec (until the 1984 federal election) and eventually led to the Liberal Party becoming Canada's governing party.

References:

Rocan, Claude, "Images of Riel in Contemporary School Textbooks", in Hathorn, Ramon and Holland, Patrick. Editors. *Images of Louis Riel in Canadian Culture*. Queenston, Ontario: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992, pp.93-126.

Silver, A.I. "The Impact on Eastern Canada of Events in 1885" in Barron, Laurie and Waldram, James B. Editors. *1885 and After: Native Society in Transition*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1986, pp. 39-51.

Further Readings:

Braz, Albert. *The False Traitor: Louis Riel in Canadian Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003.

Dorion, Leah and Préfontaine, Darren R., "Deconstructing Métis Historiography" in Barkwell, Lawrence et al. *Métis Legacy*. Winnipeg and Saskatoon: The Louis Riel and the Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2001, pp. 13-36.

Miller, J. R. "From Riel to the Métis", *Canadian Historical Review*, LXIX (1988), pp. 1-20.