

On Trial



Riel was put on trial in Regina for **treason**. He was found guilty by a jury of six English-speaking Canadian men. The jury asked the judge for mercy, but the judge chose the maximum penalty of hanging.

The decision to hang Riel caused a great reaction. Petitions were sent to Prime Minister Macdonald asking that Riel be pardoned. Queen Victoria ordered the governor general to ask that Riel not be hanged. The newspapers were full of articles on the subject. The debate was carried on in the House of Commons and in the Cabinet in Ottawa.

Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald took two months to make up his mind. He had the power to step in and stop the hanging, but he refused to do so. He knew that by not stopping it he would make French Canadians very angry and his Conservative Party would lose many votes in Quebec, but he and his Cabinet decided that the hanging should go ahead. Riel was hanged on November 16, 1885.



Louis Riel addresses the court at his trial, Regina, 1885.

Therefore, the only choice was to punish him according to the law.

The country was in an uproar. Newspapers across the country were full of the issue day after day. Petitions were sent to the government. Speeches were made both in and out of the House of Commons. Many French Canadians, and even some English Canadians, blamed John A. Macdonald's Conservative government for ignoring the concerns of the North-West for so long.

* Results for Canada of the North-West Resistance



One immediate result of the Metis resistance was the completion of the CPR. At the time of the North-West Resistance, the CPR had run out of funds. People were beginning to wonder if it would ever be finished. Once it was shown how quickly troops could be transported to the North-West on the railway, the government granted the CPR the money needed to complete the laying of track.*

Another result of the resistance was the feeling that was aroused by Riel's hanging. These feelings caused a rift between English and French Canada. Riel's hanging caused great bitterness on the part of many French Canadians. They felt that it was wrong of Riel to lead a resistance against the lawful government of Canada. However, they did not think Riel should have been hanged for it. Some believed that he was insane. Others felt that he was hanged because he was French Canadian. They saw it as a direct insult to all French Canadians.

The English Canadian reply was that if Riel had been English Canadian, or anything other than French Canadian for that matter, not a word of protest would have been heard from French Canadians. They said that French Canadians had no right to demand special treatment. Most English Canadians felt that Riel was sane and that he had committed treason by fighting against the government.

Far-Reaching Effects



In his own time many English Canadians viewed Riel as a lawless rebel. In recent years Riel has become a Canadian hero. Many people see Riel as a symbol of Western Canada's ability to stand up to what they see as Central Canada's unfair treatment, and as a defender of French Canadian minority rights in the West.

Many French Canadians have always viewed Riel as a hero because he stood up for the rights of the French-speaking Metis in the North-West against an uncaring federal government dominated by English-speaking Canadians.

In 1992, over 100 years after the North-West Resistance, the Canadian Parliament passed a resolution recognizing the contributions that Louis Riel made to Canada's growth as a nation.

Treason—the crime of betraying one's country

*Refer to page 241 for more information on the funding of the CPR.

Military Leaders

Gabriel Dumont



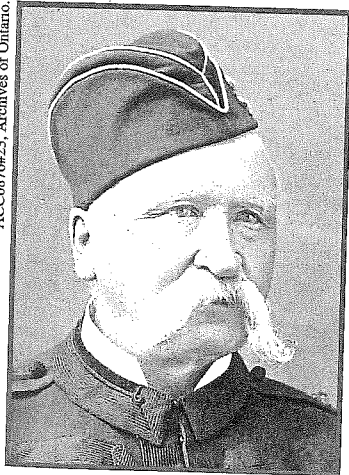
R-A6277, Saskatchewan Archives Board (detail)

Gabriel Dumont was one of the most respected men in the North-West. He was an excellent rider and marksman. He had come to the North-West in 1872 from Manitoba because he was unhappy with conditions there.

Dumont spoke French and six Native languages. He was a natural leader. He proved to be a skillful military strategist. He often

argued with Riel about military plans. Dumont wanted to use guerrilla hit-and-run tactics on the Canadian troops, knowing that this was the only way their small number of men could have any success against the far larger Canadian force. Riel insisted they meet the troops in an eye-to-eye battle at Batoche. Following the resistance, Dumont fled to the United States, where he joined "Buffalo Bill" Cody's travelling Wild West Show. He returned to Batoche after an official pardon (an amnesty) was granted to those who had taken part in the Resistance.

Major-General Frederick Middleton



ACC6876#23, Archives of Ontario

Major-General Frederick Middleton was a British infantry officer who had served in Africa, India, and New Zealand. He came to Canada in 1884 and was placed in charge of the Canadian Militia.

Middleton led his soldiers in the battles of Fish Creek and Batoche. It is thought that the storming of the Metis rifle pits by his troops on the fourth day at

Batoche was not done under his orders. For his part in the Resistance, Middleton received a medal and \$20 000.

Poundmaker



PA-28853, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa (detail)

Poundmaker was a Cree chief and adopted son of Crowfoot. Crowfoot adopted him in an effort to keep peace between their peoples. Poundmaker got his name from his skill at driving buffalo into "pounds" or enclosures where they were trapped and then killed.

Poundmaker's people were having trouble adjusting to a farming life from

the hunting life they had known. They missed the freedom of following the buffalo and were confined to a reserve with sandy soil that was not good for growing crops. They did not have enough to eat and grew more and more frustrated because the government would not listen to them.

It was this frustration which found its expression in Battleford after the government agent refused to speak with the Cree delegation. Poundmaker then withdrew to Cut Knife Hill, where he awaited Colonel Otter and his soldiers. After about six hours of fighting, the First People were gradually surrounding the troops, when Colonel Otter withdrew. Poundmaker stopped his men from following the soldiers and attacking them.

After the rebellion Poundmaker was sentenced to three years in prison, but was released after several months. He died while visiting Chief Crowfoot shortly after his release, and was buried in Crowfoot's camp. In 1967, his body was returned to his reserve and buried on the hill where the battle of Cut Knife took place.

Big Bear



C-17430, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa (detail)

Big Bear was very unhappy with the federal government's treatment of the First People and hoped that threats of a resistance would make the government take notice. He did not want to take part in a confrontation; he wanted to resist peacefully. But when his followers took up arms, as their leader he took responsibility for their actions. He was sentenced to three years for his

part in the resistance. Like Poundmaker, he died shortly after his release.

The Trial of Louis Riel

After his surrender, Louis Riel was taken to Regina to stand trial for treason. Riel was defended by two lawyers, one from Quebec and one from Ontario. They wanted to demonstrate that he was not guilty by reason of insanity. Riel disagreed; he wanted to show that the Métis had been goaded into their uprising by the actions of a government that wished to destroy them.

In Regina, only a six-man jury was required. Had the trial been held in Manitoba, the judge would have been a superior court justice, and Riel would have faced a twelve-person jury. Historians have suggested that the government feared a Manitoba jury, which would have included both English and French jurors who might have been sympathetic to the Métis.

The trial began on July 28, 1885. Riel was prevented from questioning witnesses and could not make a statement until a verdict was announced. The jury found Riel guilty of treason on August 1, after only an hour of deliberation, but they recommended mercy. Riel then made an impassioned speech:

The agitation of the North-West Territories would have been constitutional, and would certainly be constitutional today, if, in my opinion, we had not been attacked. Perhaps the Crown has not been able to find out the particulars, that we were attacked, but as we were on the scene, it was easy to understand. When we sent petitions to the government, they answered us by sending police... So irresponsible is that government... that in the course of several years, besides doing nothing to satisfy the people of this great land, it has even hardly been able to answer once or give a single response. That fact would indicate an absolute lack of responsibility, and therefore, insanity complicated with paralysis.

—Louis Riel, 1885

DID YOU KNOW...

When Riel's lawyers attempted to have all the Métis petitions admitted into evidence, the judge refused.



FIGURE 5-21 The jury for Riel's trial. Although over 30 men received summons to be part of the jury, only one spoke French. Riel was tried by a jury of English and Scottish Protestants. How do you think the trial might have turned out if Riel had faced a jury representing all peoples of the Northwest?

FIGURE 5-22 Louis Riel (standing, centre) addresses the judge at his trial. Do you think Riel should have been tried for treason? Why or why not?



WEB LINK

Read a transcript of a speech Macdonald gave in the House of Commons about the Northwest Uprising. Visit the Pearson Web site.

Judge Richardson sentenced Louis Riel to death, as the law required. Riel's lawyers launched appeals all the way to the federal cabinet, but to no avail. Although John A. Macdonald was deluged by petitions and letters from Quebec demanding that Riel be spared, he was unmoved. Riel was hanged in Regina on November 16, 1885.

He shall hang, though every dog in Quebec shall bark in his favour.

—Sir John A. Macdonald, 1885

Aftermath of the Uprising

The consequences of the Northwest Uprising would be severe for the Métis and First Nations of the Northwest. The Métis, having lost the struggle to gain title to their land, moved farther north and west into the hinterland. In order to live, they were forced to **squat** on public land reserved for roads and eventually became known as “the road allowance people.”

squat to settle on unoccupied land without legal title and without paying rent

The Métis also faced decades of discrimination and prejudice. The word “half-breed,” which once meant “a person of mixed ancestry,” became an insult. Many Métis moved to the cities, where they could hide their First Nations heritage.

Although few First Nations people had actively participated in the fighting (and, in some cases, had only fought when attacked), 81 First Nations men were charged with treason or murder, and 44 were convicted. In court, very little translation was offered, and prisoners were not allowed to make statements in their own defence. Eight First Nations men were hanged for murder; they were executed together in Battleford on November 17. Those who went to jail usually became ill, and many died soon after release.

First Nations were confined to their reserves. They found themselves at the mercy of a government that saw them as children who needed a firm hand, rather than as a proud, independent people. The work done by careful leaders such as Big Bear, who tried to gain some independence and self-sufficiency for his people, was undone by the conflict. Rules became harsher, First Nations communities were isolated from each other (and from European communities), and gathering ceremonies were banned. These restrictions lasted well into the 20th century.

It would take decades of struggle and determination for both the Métis and the First Nations to regain a measure of respect from the rest of the Canadian population. This struggle continues to this day.



FIGURE 5-23 After the uprising was over, the government captured and charged more than 200 people, including these Métis and First Nations prisoners. What was the basis of a treason charge against people who had not been treated as citizens by the government?

ACTIVITIES

1. How did the government maintain social control over the First Nations of the Northwest?
2. Summarize the Canadian government's reactions to the petitions from the Métis. What motivated such reactions?
3. Identify the key events of the Northwest Uprising. For each event, summarize the historical significance.
4. For what reasons did Sir John A. Macdonald want an uprising in the Northwest?
5. On the following pages, read the Window on Canada feature about Riel. Why do some people see him as a hero, while others see him as a villain? How do you explain such contradictory perceptions? Why might these perceptions change over time?

Judgements

6. Was Louis Riel's apparent willingness to accept money to go away a contradiction of his principles? Provide reasons for your answer.

Cause and Consequence

7. Macdonald's decision to have Riel executed had far-reaching consequences. Consider the different groups that were affected, and identify how each was affected by the government's actions. Then, with your class, discuss what might have happened if Macdonald had not decided to execute Riel.