## The Colony on the Red River

In 1812 an event took place that would have profound implications for the Métis community—and for the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Company. In fact, it would bring the rivalry between the HBC and the NWC to the point of warfare. Eventually, the two companies would merge and a unique settlement in the Northwest would be created.

Thomas Douglas, the Fifth Earl of Selkirk, was a man with a vision. He was also a man with the means to carry out his plans. As a **liberal democrat,** Selkirk had been deeply troubled by the plight of poor tenant farmers in his native Scotland. During the later part of the eighteenth century, many large landowners in Scotland had "enclosed" their farmland. Enclosure meant that tenant farmers were evicted from the land so that it could be converted for sheep-grazing. Wool was more profitable for the landowners than the rent being paid by tenant farmers, or "crofters," as they were known in Scotland. The displaced crofters had two choices, if they were to survive. They could move to newly industrialized cities, especially Glasgow, and become factory workers, or they could emigrate to British North America and become farmers. Most crofters were too poor to take advantage of the second option. So Selkirk used his fortune to create agricultural colonies for the displaced crofters in the colonies. By 1810, he had established settlements in the Maritimes and in Upper Canada. Since Selkirk was also a director of the HBC, he decided to use his influence to launch a much more ambitious project.

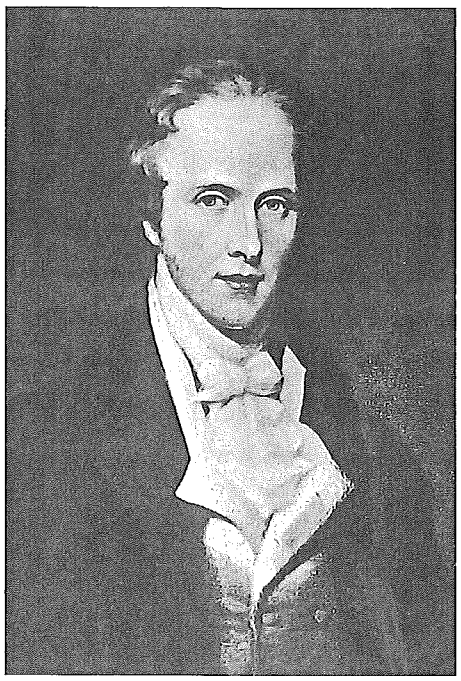

**Figure 4–12** Lord Selkirk

**liberal democrat:** in the nineteenth century, someone who fought for the rights of the underprivileged

Selkirk learned that the soil in the Red River Valley was especially fertile. He also knew that it was costly for the HBC to ship foodstuffs from England to feed employees in the Northwest. Selkirk calculated that he could solve the problems of both the crofters and the HBC by establishing a farming colony in the Red River Valley. The farmers would be able to maintain their way of life in a new land, and the HBC could use their produce to supply employees at much less expense.

In 1811, Selkirk convinced the HBC to give him some 300 000 square kilometres in what is now southern Manitoba and North Dakota. It was called "Selkirk's Grant." Selkirk and the HBC felt they had a legal right to this territory because it was part of Rupert's Land—and the king had granted the HBC a monopoly in the Northwest. Neither Selkirk nor the HBC gave much thought to the people already living in the region, or how they

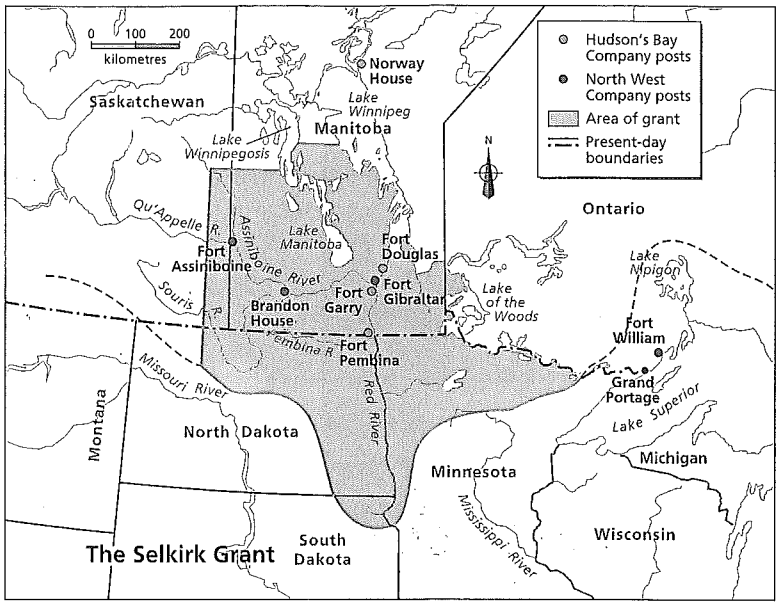


**Figure 4–13** The Selkirk Grant. Why would someone call Selkirk's plans "futile"?

might react to an influx of farming colonists. Moreover, Selkirk overlooked the difficult climate of the region, which was much harsher than the climate of Scotland. Upon learning of Selkirk's plan for a farming colony, one of his London friends was cynical:

> By God, Sir, if you are bent on something futile ... why not plough the deserts of the Sahara, which is so much nearer?

And when the first contingent of Scottish colonists arrived, an NWC employee remarked on their future prospects:

> [T]he emigrants ... will be subject to constant alarm and terror. Their habitations, their crops, their cattle will be destroyed, and they will find it impossible to exist in the country.

An advance party of thirty-six Scottish and Irish labourers left Britain in 1811 under the command of Miles Macdonell, an ex-militia officer who had a reputation for belligerence. The group was supposed to reach the Red River and prepare for the main party of colonists, who were due to leave England in 1812. Macdonell's party, however, reached York Factory very late in the year. They did not reach the Red River until August 30, 1812. A few months later, they were joined by the main party of 120 colonists—men, women and children who had arrived at York Factory that summer. Winter begins early on the Red River, and both groups had to winter at the NWC post of Fort Pembina, some 110 kilometres south of the site intended for the colony.

In the spring of 1813, Macdonell led the group back to Red River, to begin clearing land for the colony. Already overwhelmed by the work and climate, the colonists were devastated when they discovered that all the crops they had sown in the spring had failed. Faced with starvation, they had no choice but to return to Fort Pembina for the winter. In the meantime, a second group of eighty-three colonists landed at Fort Churchill by mistake. They marched—in winter—to York Factory, a journey that brought them to the brink of death. In the spring of 1814, they arrived at the Red River Colony.

While the crops survived the second year, Macdonell feared the colonists would run out of food during the winter. He issued his Pemmican Proclamation to make sure they had a food supply. It effectively banned the sale and export of pemmican from the Red River. The Métis, who relied on the proceeds of selling pemmican to the NWC, were infuriated. The proclamation also ran contrary to Lord Selkirk's instructions to Macdonell: "keep

clear of ... the NWC." Undaunted, Macdonell followed up by ordering NWC employees to vacate all their posts in the Red River Valley within six months. By the spring of 1814, the NWC and the Métis, under the direction of the NWC Chief Trader Duncan Cameron, were retaliating. They harassed the colonists by burning buildings, trampling crops, and firing rifles at night. Cameron personally convinced 133 colonists to leave in early 1815. They were taken by canoe to Fort William. Cameron then arrested Macdonell and took him to Fort William for trial. The remaining colonists left in June and made their way to Jack River House at the north end of Lake Winnipeg.

Under the command of Colin Robertson, an HBC trader who had once worked for the NWC, the colonists returned to Red River by summer's end. Robertson was far less belligerent than Macdonell and soon made peace with the Métis and the NWC. In the fall, a new governor of the colony, Robert Semple, arrived with eighty-four new colonists. Before leaving the colony, Robertson warned Semple to remain on guard from possible attacks. Semple did not follow his advice. In a show of force, Semple attacked and burned the then-empty NWC Fort Gibraltar. This action convinced the Métis that the Selkirk colonists intended to declare war on them.

In May 1816, a group of Métis, led by the young leader Cuthbert Grant, raided a brigade of HBC boats on the Assiniboine River, to the west of the Red River. They seized a supply of pemmican, which they viewed as reasonable compensation for Macdonell's Pemmican

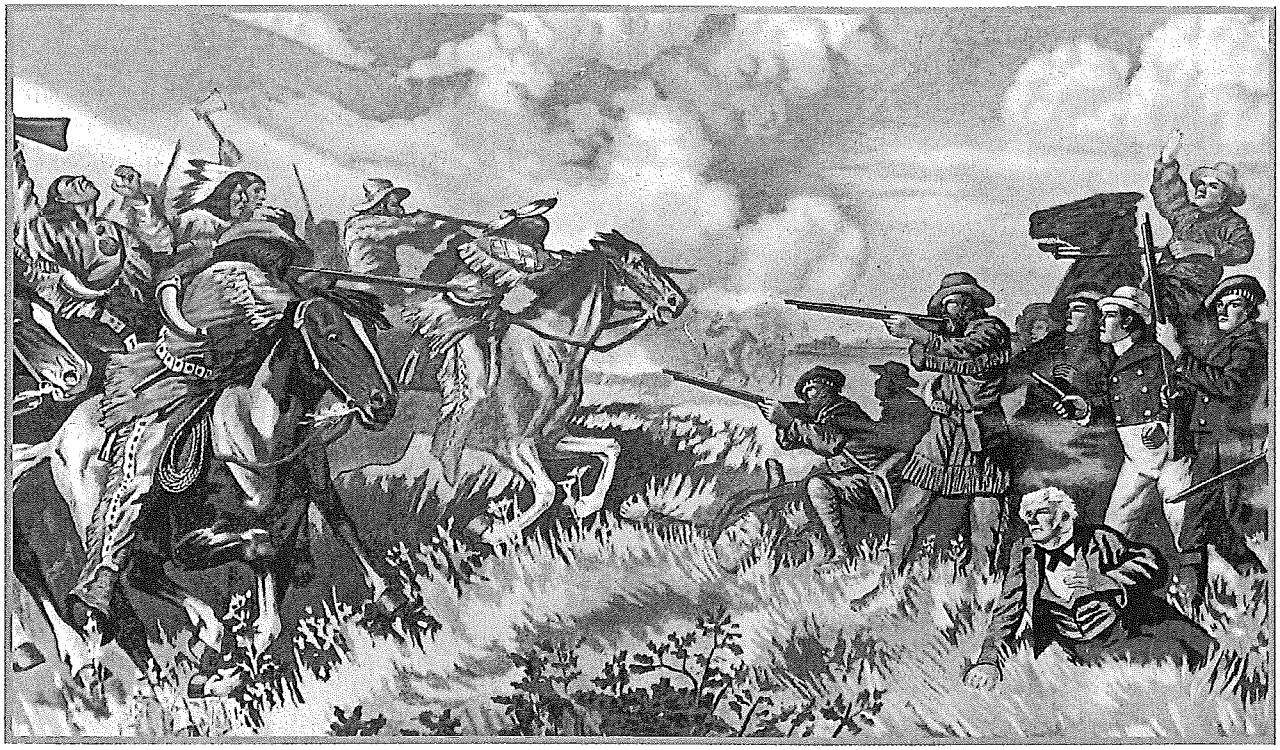

**Figure 4–14** This romanticized view of the Battle of Seven Oaks (see page 146) shows Semple and his army of twenty-eight colonists taking a brave stand against the Métis. How does the event shown here compare with the description of the battle on page 146?

Proclamation two years earlier. A month later, Grant and a party of Métis arrived at the Red River Colony. They were better armed and trained in military discipline this time, and they firmly believed they had more claim to the area than recently arrived colonists. Grant, an intelligent, well-educated leader, was also an employee of the NWC. Semple and his underlings, however, regarded all Métis as inferior, because of their mixed ancestry. He decided that such people would only understand brute force.

Late in the day, Semple and twenty-eight men rode out to confront the Métis, who were approaching the colonists' settlement. The Métis split into two groups, one in front of the colonists, one behind—a strategic move that escaped Semple's attention. Within fifteen minutes, Semple and twenty of his men, but only one Métis, were killed. This skirmish, which was later called the "Battle of Seven Oaks," turned the simmering dispute between the HBC and its colonists, and the NWC and the Métis, into a full-scale conflict.

Once again, the colonists retreated to Jack River House. Once again, the colony was destroyed. While the situation at Red River deteriorated, Selkirk travelled west from Montreal to visit his colony for the first time. He had hired a group of ninety-five Swiss mercenaries to accompany him, planning to offer them land to settle. On the way, he met the recently released Macdonell, who told him of the Battle of Seven Oaks. Angered, Selkirk moved west with his troops, seized the NWC depot of Fort William, and descended on the Red River. He took military control of the area. Protected by the Swiss soldiers, the colonists started over again for a third time.

In the spring of 1817, Selkirk made a treaty with the local Ojibwa and Cree nations, gaining possession of the Red River Valley along both the Red River and the Assiniboine River. Selkirk's payment, for what amounted to a lease, was 100 pounds of tobacco a year. By the time Selkirk left the area in the fall of 1817, he believed he had settled the many disputes between the colonists and the Métis and the NWC.

When Selkirk returned to London in late 1817, he was confronted by a deluge of lawsuits arising from the actions of his employees in the Red River. For the next three years, he battled the NWC in the courts. Worn out by this litigation, he died in the spring of 1820, just short of his forty-ninth birthday.

**Figure 4–15** Robert Semple