


The North-West Resistance, 1885

Causes

 The Manitoba Act of 1870 set aside about 500 000 hectares exclusively for use by the Metis. When the Metis had first settled on their lots in the 1870s, the area had not yet been surveyed. But the government's policy elsewhere on the prairies had been to recognize claims to land made before the official survey took place, even if the lots did not fit into the plan of square lots usually created by government surveyors. When the government surveyors first reached the Metis area on the South Saskatchewan in 1878, the river lots were recognized. However, when the surveyors began work again in the summer of 1879, they surveyed the remaining lots using the square system. The Metis could not understand why some river lots were officially recognized while others were not. Some Metis settled on river lots in the area after 1878, and ignored the square lots altogether. The Canadian government under John A. Macdonald was slow in distributing the promised land grants to the Metis.

In the meantime, more and more settlers were coming into Manitoba and the Metis were soon outnumbered. Many of the Metis decided the only answer was to move farther west. There was a community of Metis who were already farming along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River. Some of these Metis from Manitoba chose to join them. There they hoped to continue their old way of life of farming and hunting buffalo.

By 1885 the community on the North Saskatchewan River numbered about 500 people. At this time Sir John A. Macdonald's National Policy was in place. One aspect of the National Policy encouraged the settlement of the West. Even though the expected rush of settlers after the completion of the CPR did not take place, 25 000 new settlers did arrive between 1871 and 1881. The West was changing; the buffalo were disappearing and with them went the lifestyle of the Native people. The Metis lifestyle on the farms was also being threatened. It became increasingly difficult for the Metis to continue their old way of life, since there were large numbers of settlers moving into the area.

As you read on page 248, the Metis were very concerned over the government surveys, which ignored their long, narrow river-lot farms. Without a proper government survey they could not get official title to their land. They were becoming very frustrated at the lack of response to their concerns by the government of John A. Macdonald.

Louis Riel



Louis Riel played an important role in the North-West Resistance of 1885.

Following the events of 1869 and 1870 in the Red River area,* Louis Riel had fled to the United States. He was elected to Canadian Parliament twice, but was prevented from taking his seat. He suffered an emotional breakdown and spent nearly two years in asylums in Quebec. In 1875 he was granted **amnesty** if he stayed out of Canada for five years. He ended up in Montana, where he married and had two children.

On June 4, 1884, a four-man delegation, including Gabriel Dumont, arrived in Montana. Riel agreed to accompany them back to Saskatchewan so that he could help them.

Events Leading to the Resistance

After arriving back in Canada in the summer of 1884, Riel met with various groups living along the Saskatchewan River. It was decided that a petition should be sent to Ottawa. This petition was sent to the federal government in December 1884. It included the concerns of the Metis, the First People, and the settlers. It also asked for responsible government for the North-West, with control over its natural resources and representation in the federal Cabinet and Parliament, as well as provincial status for the District of Saskatchewan.

*Refer to page 222.

Amnesty—a general pardon for past offences against a government

The government had made considerable cutbacks in their treaty promises to the First People. This resulted in increased distress and problems for them.

Other letters were sent to Ottawa. These were from local North-West government officials, the North West Mounted Police, missionaries, and others. These letters warned the federal government that there could be trouble if they did not respond to the complaints that had been outlined in the petition.

Prime Minister Macdonald did respond. A commission was formed to draw up a list of all the Metis who were eligible for scrip and land grants. Scrip is a certificate or coupon that was given to Metis people as compensation for land, entitling the holder to a choice between cash or land.

The Metis were disappointed at Macdonald's response to their petition, since they had expected more assistance. They asked Riel to stay in Canada to help them.

On March 19, 1885, Riel set up a provisional or temporary government, like the provisional government he had set up in Manitoba. Gabriel Dumont was appointed to be the military leader.

The Caucasian settlers along the Saskatchewan River were not interested in joining the Metis in an armed resistance against the Canadian government. They were very angry at the federal government, but they refused to follow Riel once he decided to take action in such a violent manner. Most of the First People decided not to take up arms against the federal government. Two exceptions were the bands led by Poundmaker and Big Bear.

An Armed Uprising

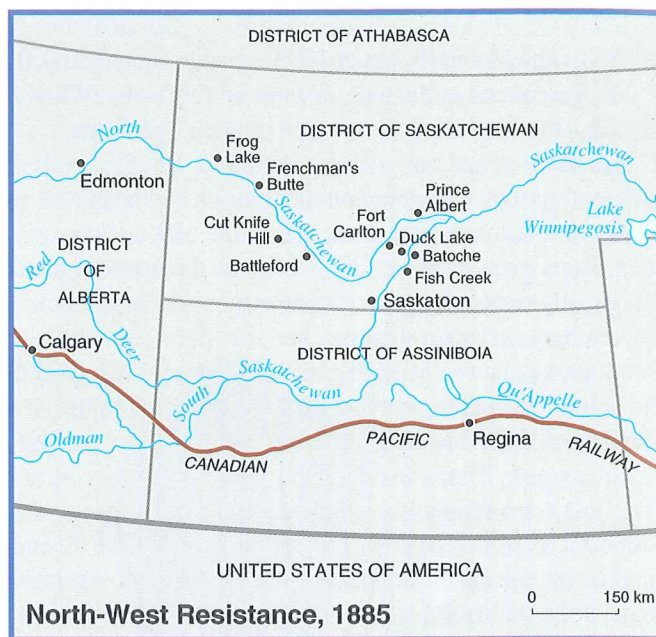


The North-West Resistance began on March 26, 1885, with a battle at the small town of Duck Lake. Gabriel Dumont and a group of Metis attacked Superintendent Crozier of the North West Mounted Police and some of his men as they were on their way to rescue arms and ammunition from a store in Duck Lake. Twelve of Crozier's men were killed and 11 wounded after a half-hour battle. Five Metis were killed. After the Battle of Duck Lake the Metis destroyed Fort Carlton. The non-Native inhabitants there had fled to Prince Albert.

Chief Poundmaker travelled at the end of March to Battleford to meet with the government agent to discuss getting more food for his people. When the townspeople heard that the First People were coming, they fled to the safety of the fort. The town was deserted when Poundmaker arrived and the government agent refused to come out of the fort to talk with him. Poundmaker's companions became frustrated and angry. They broke windows and took supplies.

The most serious incident involving the First People occurred on April 2 at Frog Lake. Chief Big Bear's men killed nine people, including the government agent, Thomas Quinn.

Prime Minister Macdonald, having heard news of armed rebellion, ordered 8000 soldiers and volunteers to travel west on the unfinished Canadian Pacific Railway. The trip took them only nine days.



*Major-General Middleton, the commander of the Canadian Militia, was in charge of battle operations. He divided his troops into three groups. He and his column set out for the Metis headquarters at Batoche. A column led by Colonel Otter set out for Battleford, where he hoped to find Poundmaker. The third column, led by Major-General Strange, set out after Big Bear and his men.

Throughout the North-West Resistance of 1885, Riel was guided by his religious convictions. Dumont wanted to use hit-and-run guerrilla tactics to defend Batoche, but Riel insisted that he had been ordered by visions from God to wait until Batoche was attacked and then defend it.

On April 24, at Fish Creek, Gabriel Dumont's men attacked Middleton's column, using the hit-and-run and then hit again tactics that Dumont found so effective. Dumont was able to slow down Middleton's progress, but he did not stop him from reaching Batoche. Middleton arrived there on May 9.

The battle at Batoche lasted for four days, from May 9 to May 12. The 300 Metis and First People had dug rifle pits from which they fired at their attackers. By the last day the defenders were out of ammunition and were firing stones and nails from their rifles. Finally Middleton's troops stormed the rifle pits and the battle was over. There were over 25 dead from both sides.

*You read on page 241 about how Prime Minister Macdonald was able to get the money he needed to finish the railway after transporting soldiers so quickly to the trouble spot.

Both Riel and Dumont managed to escape. Riel gave himself up after a few days, but Dumont fled to the United States.

Colonel Otter located Poundmaker and about 200 followers at Cut Knife Hill, near Poundmaker's reserve. Otter had hoped to make a surprise attack, but the Cree were ready for them and drove them off. Poundmaker's men had every opportunity to kill Otter's soldiers, but Poundmaker held them back and allowed the soldiers to return to Battleford. He saw no honour in killing an enemy who had already been defeated.

Poundmaker then decided to go to Batoche to help the Metis. On their way they heard the news of the Metis defeat. Realizing that there was no point in further resistance, Poundmaker surrendered to Middleton on May 26.

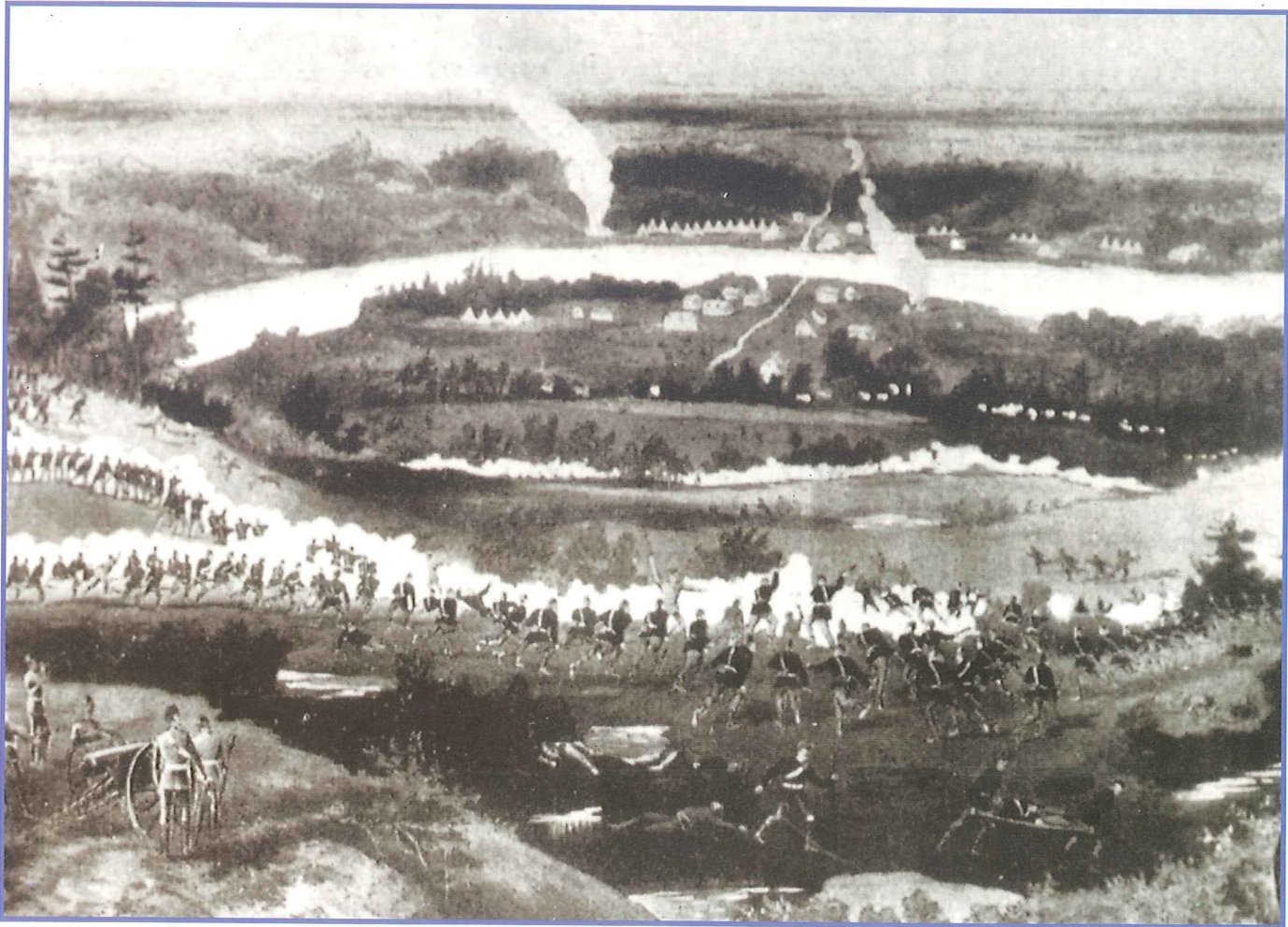
On May 28 Big Bear and his men clashed with General Strange's soldiers at Frenchman's Butte. Strange withdrew at the end of the day, planning to fight again on the next. Big

Bear and his men, being low on ammunition, took advantage of the lull in the action to escape while they could.

Both General Strange and General Middleton followed Big Bear for the next few weeks. They never did find him, but on July 2 he surrendered, accompanied only by his young son. His followers had either surrendered or simply gone elsewhere. Big Bear's surrender marked the end of the 99-day North-West Resistance.

Exploring Further

1. List the groups of people in the North-West and the concerns that each had regarding the federal government prior to the North-West Resistance.
2. Are uprisings like the North-West Resistance ever justified? Explain your answer.
3. What other methods might the Metis and the First People have used to solve their problems? How might Prime Minister Macdonald have avoided the resistance?



Canadian government troops met the Metis at the Battle of Batoche, May 9 to 12, 1885.

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.

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.

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.

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.



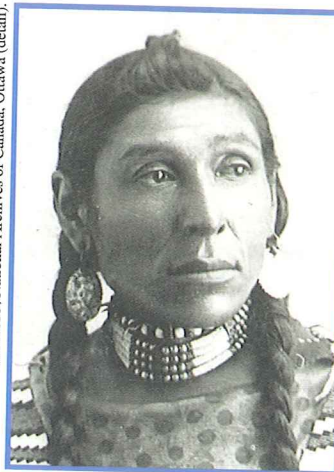
Major-General Frederick Middleton was a British infantry officer who had served in Africa, India, and New Zealand. He came to Canada in 1884 and was placed in charge of the Canadian Militia.

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.