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Bakalářská práce

Louis Riel and the Northwest Rebellion: From a Villain into a Hero?

Louis Riel a Severozápadní rebelie: Ze zlosyna hrdinou?

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České Budějovice 2016

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Anna Regina Helal, M.A. for her encouragement, patient guidance, useful suggestions and valuable advice.

Abstract

The main goal of this thesis is to find out whether Louis Riel the leader of the Métis nation is a hero or villain and to answer the questions of what his contribution to the Métis cause is and how his image has changed over 131 years. The first part deals with the historical background of the Canadian Confederation, the Indians and Métis. Special attention is paid to the description of distinct cultures of the latter groups. The second part answers questions raised above in the context of the both rebellions. Further it deals with the political consequences of the second rebellion and trace down the development of the Métis up to the present.

Anotace

Hlavním cílem této práce je zjistit zda je Louis Riel, vůdce lidu Métis, hrdinou nebo zlosynem. Odpovídá na otázky, jaký byl jeho přínos lidu Métis a jak se změnilo vnímání jeho osobnosti za posledních 131 let. První část se zabývá historickým pozadím Kanadaské konfederace, Indianům a lidu Métis. Zvláštní pozornost je věnována popisu jejich odlišných kultur. Druhá část odpovídá na otázky zmíněné výše v kontextu obou povstání. Dále se zabývá politickými důsledky druhé rebelie a mapuje vývoj situace Métis do současnosti.

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Introduction

I have chosen this topic for several reasons. I have always been interested in the Aboriginals and their culture. While studying a subject called Canadian Studies, I first came across the term Métis. To my surprise, the term referred to the people whose origin was closely related to the Amerindians. The Métis are Aboriginal people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry. The term was used to designate children of European traders and indigenous women. Nowadays it describes any people with mixed European and First Nations ancestry. During my search for more information, I found out that they had involved in two rebellions against the Canadian Government and their leader, Louis Riel, was even hanged for his part in them. Moreover, he is probably the most controversial person in Canadian history. It was the mystery of his personality that fascinated me most about the topic. From that moment on, I wished to reveal his true identity.

A week before handing in my thesis, an important event has occurred in Canada. 600,000 Métis and non-status Indians have been given Indian Aboriginal status under the Constitution by the Supreme Court of Canada. This fact has required my immediate response because this landmark decision is closely related to my topic. As I am dealing with the current standing of the Métis in the last chapter, it has been necessary to incorporate this event as well. However, the decision as such raises too many new questions as for repercussions and the future life of the Métis people, which I have not been able to answer. I have been limited by the scope of my thesis, but I do not exclude the possibility of dealing with this problem sometime in the future.

Louis Riel is considered by many as a villain and nothing more. But what if it was the other way round? The heart of this thesis seeks to answer this question: Was Louis Riel a hero or villain? My hypothesis is that he was a villain and deserved to be punished. I will also try to answer the following sub-questions:

- What was his contribution to the Métis cause?
- How has his image changed over 131 years?

In the first part of the thesis, I have described the development of the Canadian Confederation. Particular attention is paid to the Indians and Métis whose lives were profoundly influenced by this development. I have focused on their lifestyle, culture and origin in order to distinguish them from each other. Their distinct cultures seem crucial for the understanding of their hardships, stemming from different sources, and causes of the rebellions that followed.

I have devoted the second part of the thesis to Louis Riel and the role he played in the rebellions against the Canadian Government. One chapter is specially targeted at Riel's alleged insanity in an attempt to reveal the logic of his thinking and motives for his deeds, as well as the Canadian establishment's responses.

To achieve my goals, I have used various methods. The fact that much has been written on this subject allowed me to compare opinions of several authors. Not always have I agreed with their attitudes. I have used critique to express my disagreement with some of them. I have drawn inspiration from both online and literature sources. The ones I would like to emphasise are *Canada: A People's History* written by Don Gillmor and *Louis 'David' Riel: The Prophet of the New World* written by Tom Flanagan. I found these sources particularly helpful throughout the whole research.

In my Conclusion I will address the three issues hypothesised and confront them with my initial expectations.

Terminology

Before I start talking about the history of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, it is necessary to explain a few terms I am going to use throughout the thesis.

"Aboriginal People": The term refers to the indigenous inhabitants of Canada when describing in a general manner the Inuit, and First Nations (Indians), and Métis people (itk.ca).

"Indians": The term dates back to the late fifteenth century and the mistaken initial assumption that Columbus had reached eastern Asia. Because people were concerned about the impact of using this inaccurate term, by the 1970s the term "First Nations" came into common usage. Even though the term has persisted it is considered as outdated. "Aboriginal" and "First Nations" are not interchangeable terms, because the latter term includes only Indians whereas Aboriginal covers apart from the Indians also the Métis and Inuit (learnnc.org).

"Status Indian": An individual recognized by the federal government as being registered under the Indian Act. To be a Status Indian requires satisfaction of certain criteria. Status Indians are entitled to a wide range of programs and services offered by federal agencies and provincial governments. (nonstatusindian.com).

"Non-status Indian": An Indian person who is not registered as an Indian under the Indian Act. They are not recognised as Indians because they cannot prove their status or they may have lost their status before for a variety of reasons i.e. getting a university degree, marrying a Canadian person, etc. (nonstatusindian.com).

"The Métis": were the offspring of French fur traders and Indian mothers. Because of their mixed ancestry they were often called half-breeds, which is a derogatory and humiliating term pointing to their mixed ancestry. With the Supreme Court's decision they are now officially recognised as Indians (firstpeopleofcanada.com).

“The Inuit”: are known as the people of the Canadian Arctic. They used to be called Eskimos, which came from a Native American word for 'eater of raw meat'. Now the Arctic people are officially known as the Inuit, which means 'the people', or singularly, Inuk, which means 'the person' (firstpeopleofcanada.com).

“non-Native people”: people born in another area or country than that lived in. On the other hand, the Aboriginal people are people inhabiting a region from the beginning (freedictionary.com).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

1 History of Manitoba and Saskatchewan in the 1880's

The main aim of this chapter is to examine the establishment of the Canadian Confederation and its subsequent political and geographical development. In particular attention will be paid to these questions: What were the main impulses for the formation? What part did the transcontinental railway play in the development of the West?

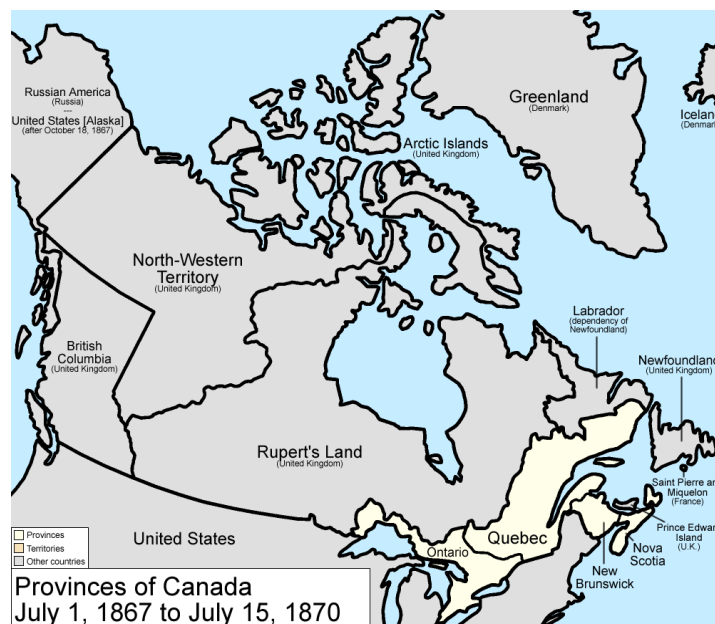
1.1 Establishment of Confederation

Our story took place in the lands that are now Canadian provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan. However, in 1867, the year after which followed in terms of my topic the sequence of the most important events, neither of the provinces existed. A significant part of these lands was included in a vast area called Rupert's Land which was owned by the Hudson's Bay Company. The company had been granted the land by the king of England in 1670. For two hundred years it had governed its land and controlled the fur trade throughout much of the British controlled North America. If we omit this long period which is not so important for us, we will get right to the 1860s, particularly to the year 1867. Prior to this year, British North America was comprised of scattered colonies that included Prince Edward Island, Vancouver Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, British Columbia and the Province of Canada (present-day Ontario and Quebec). They are nicely depicted on the following page. In 1867 some of these colonies and the Province of Canada decided to establish a Confederation. The Confederation was founded mainly on the initiative of the latter province. There were many reasons for this: first of all, there was fear that the neighbouring United States would take over Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company. It meant that they would seize control over the large area and prevent Canadian provinces from further expansion to the West. They felt that if they united, they would have a better chance of defending themselves and keeping their land (thecanadianencyclopedia.ca). I will focus more thoroughly on this aspect of Canadian development in the following subchapters.

The Confederation was not born as a result of revolution. Rather, it was created after a series of negotiations between individual colonies and the Province of Canada. Canadian

colonies represented a heavy financial burden for Great Britain, so the British officials welcomed the idea of Confederation because that might permit colonies to be more independent and reduce the need for financial and military support. Confederation was established by the British North America Act of 1867 and included the province of Canada divided into Ontario and Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, the other colonies refused to join. The Act of 1867 also provided that other provinces might come in later. The union was only the first step in a slow but steady process of nation-building. Another move represented unification of the territory from the Atlantic Coast to the Pacific Coast. For this reason, Rupert's land was purchased by Canada and subsequently joined Confederation in 1869. Since then, the land had come to be called as North-West Territories (Melnyk, 1992:61,67).

Table No. 1 The Dominion of Canada



In this picture is depicted the Dominion of Canada (in white colour) before the Rupert's Land was purchased (wordpress.stgeorges.bc.ca).

1.2 The Canadian Government Policy for the North-West Expansion

Table No. 2 Sir John. A. Macdonald



The first Prime Minister of Canada (www.historymuseum.ca)

Following the creation of Confederation another far more difficult task appeared for the federal government. Confederation lacked unity and there had been fears of the United States dominance and even annexation of the Canadian lands (thecanadianencyclopedia.ca). The important figure that considerably contributed to the binding of Confederation together and also one of the Founding Fathers was Sir John Alexander Macdonald. He became the first Prime Minister of Canada in 1867. Macdonald was fully aware of the need for consolidation of the union and took his political steps accordingly. He was the main supporter of the idea of a united nation from coast to coast (Melnik, 1992:68).

First of all, it was necessary to bring law and order to the new vast empire and populate it as quickly as possible. Because of this, a provisional act was passed providing that the North-West Territories would be governed by a lieutenant-governor assisted by a counsel. Nonetheless, during the process of transition nobody considered opinions of the Indians,

the English and French-speaking Métis and the Inuit who had already lived in the North-West Territories. Even the Local leaders were neither considered nor included in the Confederation conferences and negotiations. Many of them assumed that the West was acquired by Canada only as a subservient territory and not as an equal partner. Moreover, the position of lieutenant-governor was deliberately given to anti-French William McDougall from Ontario, so many people, especially the Métis, felt that they did not have a proper representation (Melnyk, 1992:69).

They also did not like the fact that the important decisions were being made in distant capitals without their approval. Their concerns were fully justified because despite having a "representation", their ultimate influence on politics was very small as the federal government always had the final word. It should be noted that behind this development stood Macdonald's cunning policy. Appointment of McDougall as a lieutenant-governor was supposed to have discouraged French settlers from heading west. As soon as there were enough English speaking farmers Macdonald planned to establish official government (Brown, 2006:13). All these circumstances and several other led to an upheaval and later to the resistance in the Red River settlement, the only really settled part of Rupert's land by that time. The rebellion eventually resulted in the creation of the province of Manitoba in 1870. The details, circumstances of the resistance and its consequences will be analysed in the second part of my thesis, particularly in chapter 5 (Melnyk, 1992:68,69,70).

1.3 The American Threat

Another challenge that pushed British North America toward Confederation was the atmosphere of conflict in North America. Since America had fought Britain to gain its independence in the 18th century, the relationship between British North America and the United States had never been stable. The relationship became even worse when Britain supported the South in the American Civil War. The North won the war and was angry at Britain for helping the South. The American Civil War and its immediate aftermath not only encouraged the union of the British North American colonies, but also directly determined the form that their government took (collectionscanada.gc.ca).

Among many Americans a doctrine of Manifest Destiny spread and quickly gained in popularity. This was a belief that the United States was destined, by God, to control all of North America. Although the ultimate goals of Manifest Destiny were never reached, the popularity of the idea undoubtedly weighed on the minds of many British North American leaders and residents (Connor & Hull, 2011:176).

A few decades after the Civil War the USA unsuccessfully attempted to conquer the North-west territories in the 1812 war with Britain. The details of the war are not important for us; however, the war was a proof of American desire for the control over the northern part of America. The American loss in the war also proved that this was not militarily feasible (thecanadianencyclopedia.ca).

Fear of American expansiveness became the main driving force for the Canadian territorial expansionism. American settlement was incredibly fast and that was mainly thanks to the Union Pacific Railway completed in 1869. When the USA purchased Alaska from Russia in 1864, it was thought this would encourage the Americans to connect the north and south through British Columbia located on the west coast. The vast Northwest territories represented the lure for many Americans. American merchants and colonists began to see an opportunity in Canadian plains which were practically uninhabited by that time. To prevent such development, Canada had to outstrip the Americans and open up new land for colonization which would strengthen the position of Britain in North British America and possibly discourage Americans from penetrating to the Canadian territory (slmc.uottawa.ca).

1.4 Planning to Link Canada Coast to Coast

Canadian leaders quickly realised that the construction of a railway across the whole continent was necessary for the future development of Dominion. The construction was important for several reasons. First of all, there was enormous economic potential because it would provide farmers a means to get crops from them to market. If the railway was expanded across the prairies and into British Columbia, raw goods could be transported from the West to manufacturing points in the eastern part of British North America. It was also believed that the building of the railway would help open up new settlement

opportunities and establish stronger British presence in the West. Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the Province of Canada all had their own railroads, but the costs were staggering and each government was struggling to cope with the debt from building its railroad. If the railroad system was to expand, the colonies would need to work together. This way they would be able to invest in the railway as one unit and negotiate with possible investors and builders as a single entity (Melnik,1992: 61,67).

John A. Macdonald once said "Until bound by that iron link, we are not a Dominion in fact." He was a strong supporter of a railway and considered the construction of Intercolonial and transcontinental railway as a crucial step for the acceleration of the settlement. In fact, completion of the Intercolonial Railway was a condition written into the British North America Act, 1867. The Railway became a necessity not only in terms of settlement but also because of the extension of the Dominion borders. In 1871, British Columbia was lured into the Confederation but agreed to join Confederation only on condition that the federal government build a railway in 10 years. Macdonald proposed a railway that would stretch eight thousand kilometres through some of the most varied and difficult terrain in the world (Gillmor, and Michaud, 2002:10).

The construction as such would have a profound impact on the Aborigines and Métis way of life. Most of them did not manage to adapt to the influx of new settlers and radical changes related to it.

2 Population of the Plains

In this chapter I will try to develop an idea of the way of life and traditions of the Indians who had been living in the plains which is a relatively vast area located in Rupert's Land and stretching further before the Confederation was created. The insight into their culture is very important for understanding of their problems that followed the foundation. The union was certainly beneficial in terms of unity and a sense of safety against the U.S. However, for the above mentioned group of people it would bring about radical changes that would lead almost to the destruction of their culture. I am focusing on them because they will play an important role in a war conflict that is also the subject of my thesis.

2.1.1 Geography

The Plains cultural area is a vast territory that extends from southern Manitoba and the Mississippi River westward to the Rocky Mountains, and from the North Saskatchewan River south into Texas. For this cultural area is typical a continental climate in which dominate very dry and hot summers and very cold winters. The only scarce source of water is represented by rivers. The most peculiar feature of the Plains is high grass that covers the rolling prairies in the east; short grasses, sage and cacti the arid high plains dominate in the west. Tree growth on the high plains is restricted to the valleys, becoming rapidly more noticeable toward the margins of the area (thecanadianencyclopedia.ca).

2.1.2 The Original Inhabitants

Under the term "Plains people" we can imagine a number of different and unique Indian groups, including the Blackfoot, Cree, Ojibwa, Assiniboiné, Nakota and Dakota. These Indian nations had been living on the Plains for hundreds of years. Their culture was based primarily on the immense herds of *bison or buffalo*¹ that roamed over and fed upon these grasslands until the early 1880s. Buffalo was their main source of livelihood and it can be said that the Plains people were able to use every piece of it. They processed the meat in many different ways but the most common way was sun-dried and sliced meat mixed with fat and berries also called pemmican. Hunting provided them not only with food but also clothing and shelter, buffalo hides were used for manufacturing of robes, tent covers, moccasins, shields and bones for tools and utensils. This all shows how dependant they were on buffaloes. (firstpeoplesofcanada.com).

¹ Early American settlers called bison "bufello" due to the similar appearance between the two animals, and the name "buffalo" stuck for the American variety. But it's wrong. The American bison (*Bison bison*) lives only in North America, while the two main buffalo species reside in Africa and Asia. A small population of bison relatives called the European bison (*Bison bonasus*) lives in isolated parts of Poland (livescience.com).

The Indians did not live permanently in one place but led a nomadic way of life based on the adaptation to the movements of the buffalo herds. This a way of living reflected their specific social organization. Most of the Plains tribes functioned at the level of band which was led by a chief. Decisions of bands were based on unanimous approval in the council of elders. Chiefs were advisers rather than rulers and their main obligations represented quest for food and defence against enemy attacks. Bands moved around independently of each other, in lean periods smaller groups formed and split off to increase the likelihood of finding sufficient food. Only in midsummer, when the buffalo were concentrated in large herds would the bands come together for a few weeks in one large tribal encampment (thecanadianencyclopedia.ca).

In terms of religion, many of the plains Indians were observant. Some of them believed in a great god, who the Sioux called the 'Wakan Tanka' meaning the great spirit. The Plains believed that all animals, plants, trees, stones and clouds possessed spirits and that the Earth was the mother of all these spirits, and that they each could be prayed to. Shamans were those who were blessed by the great spirit with the ability to heal (firstpeoplesofcanada.com).

The arrival of European settlers and fur traders and their subsequent contact with Plains people brought a rapid culture change. These encounters led to the spread of Europeans diseases among the Indians, especially smallpox which sometimes wiped out entire bands. Buffaloes became essential to the fur trade after the arrival of Europeans. With the invention of breech-loading rifles the killing was much easier and positive developments in purchase prices for fur encouraged hunters to kill more buffaloes. Besides, American policies supported extermination of the buffalo with the intention to drive the Indians to starvation. It did not take long and buffaloes were really at the verge of extinction in the 1880s. Among other factors that contributed to the Indian decimation was the arrival of whiskey traders and the concept of the reserve established by the federal government on which we are going to focus, in more detail, in the next subchapter (thecanadianencyclopedia.ca).

2.1.3 The Canadian Approach to the Aboriginals

As the building of the railway moved west, it became necessary to establish treaties with the natives, whose land the railway would cross. The Natives started to be seen as an obstacle for further expansion and there was a need to displace them. By the 1870s, settlers from eastern Canada were pouring into the west expecting land. Before legally giving out land grants to the incoming settlers the government had to convince the Aboriginals to turn over their land to the Crown (firstpeoplesofcanada.com). Contrary to the U.S. where native land was occupied by force, Canada hoped to achieve peaceful transfer of land in exchange for compensation (Gillmor, and Michaud, 2002:17). One of the reasons was general repulsion of the Canadian politicians and the lack of the government finances for leading a war. Such a compensation was usually based on a single payment of money, promises of reserves of land, assistance in case of famine or pestilence, and more.

Nevertheless, the Indians saw treaties in a different light. They had no thought of the consequences that would follow from the treaties and considered the treaties as solemn pacts establishing the future relationships between them and the new Government of Canada and its people. They signed them in the belief that the Crown would cherish and protect them. Their main concern was the survival of their people. Indian representatives signed the treaties to ensure that they would receive some government assistance in the future. On the other hand, the Canadian Government intended to deprive the Indians of their claims and rights to their land forever. The Government also expected them to assimilate, in other words, to give up their customs, language, religious beliefs and everything else that differentiated them from Canadians of British origin (firstpeoplesofcanada.com).

Another very important contrast between Europeans and the Aboriginals can be seen in a concept of the land. Europeans recognised individual possession of land. Such land could be owned and controlled by an individual, a company, or the government. Individuals or companies could create wealth from the land they owned by farming it, mining it, exploiting it for other commercial purposes, or renting it to others. The Aboriginals, on

the contrary, did not divide land up into packages, they recognised only group rights to land. Except for wars, they did not intrude onto other tribe's territory because they recognised tribal right to certain land (firstpeoplesofcanada.com).

As has been previously mentioned, decisions of the Indian bands were based primarily on the consensus of a council reflecting the viewpoints of the majority, not on the needs of any individual. As soon as the British understood their system of decision-making, landholding, consensus and leadership, they designed their treaty-making process to work within the Aboriginal framework. The Government strategy was to first complete negotiations with the groups most desirous of accepting government terms, so that those who refused to cooperate, would feel isolated and fear for their future. The Aboriginals were told that the settlers were coming whether they liked it or not. The negotiators tried to convince them that signing the treaty was their only option to acquire land and assistance. Overall eleven treaties were made. Unfortunately, within a very few years of the signing of the treaties, many of the promises would be broken (firstpeoplesofcanada.com).

2.1.4 Causes of Their Hardships

From all the hardships the Indians had to face the disappearance of the buffalo was definitely the worst. Hundreds of Indians starved to death for not having enough food. Their living conditions deteriorated quickly. On the one hand, the federal government offered them help in the form of food rations, but on the other the federal government officials were those who supported and encouraged settlers and hunters to kill buffaloes. From my point of view, their behaviour seems very hypocritical and aimed mainly at territorial gain. The treaties with the federal government guaranteed food rations thus many Indian chiefs in a bid to reduce suffering of their people accepted the government terms. However, just as the bison disappeared, Lieutenant-Governor Edgar Dewdney cut rations to indigenous people in an attempt to reduce government costs.

Similarly to the Métis, the Indians were fearful of losing their culture, religion and traditions. For Macdonald assimilation represented the final solution to all the problems the Indians posed. Residential schools were built for this purpose. The essence of these

schools was to make the Indians economically self-sufficient so they would be less dependant on the public purse. Aboriginal leaders accepted residential schools when signed the above-mentioned treaties. However, their vision was completely different from what would follow. They hoped Euro-Canadian schooling would enable their young to learn the skills of the newcomer society and help them make a successful transition to a world dominated by the strangers. The government objective was certainly good; however, the implementation was disastrous. Lack of finance lead to poor level of food and inadequate clothing for the children. Underfed and malnourished, the students were particularly vulnerable to diseases such as tuberculosis and influenza. Lessons were taught in English or French, languages which many of the children did not speak. Often many of them were physically and even sexually abused by the staff (firstpeoplesofcanada.com).

The Indians were totally desperate and their only options were to fight against Canadians, move further westward, or wait and hope that the Canadian government would keep the promises they had made. Most of them believed that unlike the Americans who almost always broke the promises they had made with the tribes on American site, the Canadians would be more honest.

Certainly more could have been said about the Indians; however, the scope of the thesis does not allow me to fully focus on them. Therefore, I decided to put additional information about them and their role in the second rebellion in the appendix.

3 The Métis People

In this chapter I will focus on the origin of the Métis nation and its development in historical, cultural and political terms. I will try to explain where they came from and the difference between distinct Métis groups and their ambitions for the future.

3.1 Where the Métis Came from?

Another group of people who were closely related to the Indians were the Métis. As we already know, the Métis are mixed-blood people of French Canadian and Aboriginal ancestry. Their roots go back to the first French explorers the so-called *Coueurs des bois*² who penetrated to the interior of Canada in 17th century, where the Natives had been living for thousands of years (chroniclesofamerica.com). *Coueurs des bois* were itinerant and unlicensed fur traders of New France. The phrase originates from French and means runners in the woods, running from the enforcers of the law protecting monopolies, in fact. When the French king made laws forbidding trading by anyone except the French monopoly company, many young men decided to trade for furs illegally on their own. They were attempting to outstrip the Aboriginal middlemen who represented their competitors. The independent *Coueurs des bois* played an important role in the European exploration of the continent and in establishing trading contacts with the Indians. During the height of the fur trade in the 1700s and 1800s, many French Canadian fur traders married or co-habited with Native women. The children born from these unions formed a new Nation in Canada, the 'Western Métis' (firstpeoplesofcanada.com).

However, it cannot be missed out that along with the French-speaking Métis culture also developed a culture of the English-speaking Métis. The traders who cohabited with the Native women were not only French but also the English and Scots. They were called *Voyageurs*³. The descendants of the *Voyageurs* were called the Countryborn or Anglo-

² <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/coueurs-de-bois/>

³ The voyageurs were independent contractors, workers or minor partners in a company who were involved in the fur trade. The fur trade changed over the years, as did the groups of men working in it. In the 17th

Métis. Compared to the francophone Métis community, the Countryborn were less nomadic and their livelihood was focused mainly on agriculture. It is clear from the extant records that the Countryborn were not completely alien to the hunt (curve.carleton.ca).

Fundamental differences between the two communities lay in religion and languages. The French speakers were generally Roman Catholic and those of British descent were Protestants. Most Countryborn were Anglican or Presbyterian. Today, the two groups are no longer politically distinct, and are commonly known on the Canadian Prairies simply as Métis (Barkwell, Dorion, & Hourie, 2006:65). Another aspect were languages. Despite the basic cultural dichotomy which characterized the Métis and the Country born, many instances of collective action in defence of common interests have been documented, and general social intercourse between the two was possible via the Indian languages of their common maternal ancestors (curve.carleton.ca). Many mixed-ancestry fur trade communities across Canada developed their own languages, including Michif, a regionally varied blend of French and various Aboriginal languages including Cree and Dene. When the French-Canadian fur traders married Native women, most were not fluent in the local Native languages, and most Native women did not speak French. Therefore, children born into these marriages were exposed to both French and a Native language (usually Cree). It was the first generation Métis children who started blending parts of both languages into the new Michif language (firstpeoplesofcanada.com).

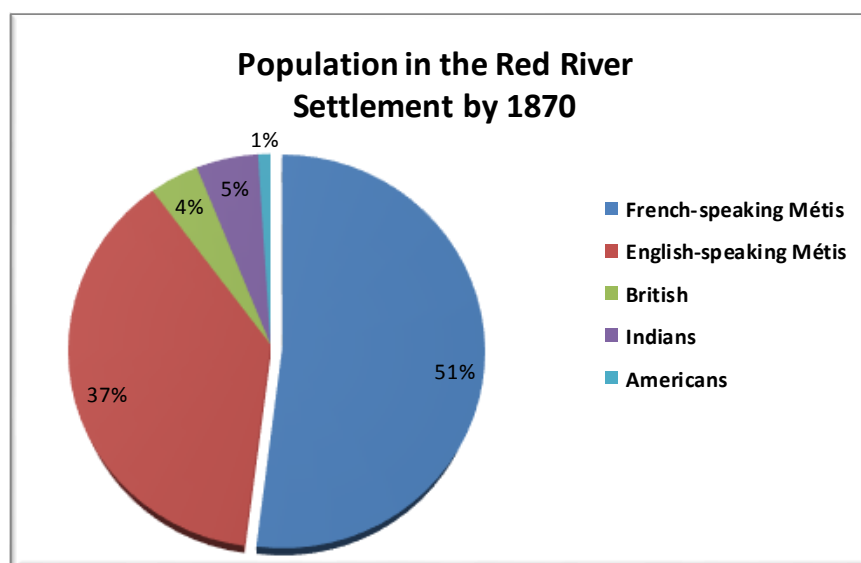
It comes down to the question for what purpose the Indians offered wives to the traders. Basically, it was a vital part of trade, the Natives wanting to establish strong and close relationships with their European allies and trading partners. Native women not only provided companionship for the fur traders but they became instrumental in their survival because they were very skilful. They also played an important role in the process of accommodating two cultures. Many of them were able to translate the language, sew new clothing for their husbands, cook food and help resolve any cultural issues that arose.

century, voyageurs were often *Coueurs des bois*, independent (but not solitary) traders responsible for obtaining goods for Aboriginal peoples from suppliers (thecanadianencyclopedia.ca).

Another thing from which the fur traders benefited greatly was the First People knowledge of the land and their experience of survival in the harsh west for thousands of years (firstpeoplesofcanada.com).

Due to their close ties with the fur trade, most Métis were spread along the Canadian fur trade routes. However, the majority of the Métis communities were established in the Red River area of what is now Manitoba, and later in Saskatchewan and Alberta. By 1800, Métis were established as a distinct cultural group on the prairies. They worked for both the Hudson's Bay Company & Northwest Company as voyageurs, buffalo hunters, and traders. The Red River Settlement grew and by 1869 almost 12,000 people lived there. As you can see from the graph below, the majority in the settlement represents the French-speaking Métis followed by the English-speaking Métis. The number of the Indians and British is very low and account for 5% and 4 % respectively. The Americans represent only 1%.

Table No. 3 Population in the Red River



(bac-lac.gc.ca)

In comparison to the Indians, the Métis led a semi-nomadic way of life. The Métis community was very diverse. Some Métis did farming and preferred sedentary lifestyle,

but on the other hand there were many whose livelihood depended mainly on buffalo hunting. The Métis were passionate buffalo hunters. For them the buffalo hunts were not just hard work but also festive events. Hundreds of families often made their journey to various places on a Canadian or American site where the hunt took place. At the end of each hunt, boisterous parties were held, celebrating a successful hunt (firstpeoplesofcanada.com).

3.2 Métis Ambitions

The Canadian government and the Orangemen generally considered the Métis as primitive and oftentimes lumped them with the Indians together. I think that such perception seems quite mistaken because the Métis lifestyle was very different from that of the Indians. Certainly there were similarities as for the way of dressing or making a living, but from the overall perspective, the Métis culture was more complex. The question whether they were primitive or not is very difficult. Even many scholars like George Stanley or William Morton who dealt with the Métis culture over a long period could not agree on it. William Morton rejected George Stanley's belief that the Red River Métis were uncivilized. Instead, he argued that they were prevented from becoming an agrarian civilization by hunting and voyaging activities that “bound them ineluctably to nomadism and barbarism” (www.mhs.mb.ca).

Personally, I also incline to the stance that they were not primitive. I believe that this question is an important part of my topic, so I am going to focus on it in the second part of my thesis. Particularly I am going to target on George Stanley's viewpoint.

Their way of life might have seemed primitive from the point of view of those who lived in the East where life was more hectic. The Métis lived their quiet lives in an isolated Red River settlement and did not wish to change their unique culture. But what they wished to change was the control over their territory they lived in. Even though the Métis ancestors had been living there a long before the Hudson's Bay Company, their descendants still did not have guarantee of property rights to their land. So when the first surveyors came to the settlement their main goal, or ambition if you want, became the establishment of their own government. Only in this way they could regulate what was

happening in their territory, they believed. In this regard, Louis Riel, the person to whom I am going to pay special attention in the rest of my thesis, played a major role. Riel gained approval and respect among the French-speaking Métis mainly thanks to his experience and natural ability to lead. He became what Tomas Flanagan calls a human bridge between native and white, French and English, Catholic and Protestant, British and American, human and divine. It was him who first came up with the ideas of own their government and united nation. He understood that only as an organised and cohesive group were they strong enough to change their situation. What he meant under the term united nation were not only the Franco-Métis but also the Anglo-Métis (Flanagan, 1983: 201,202).

A sea change that would affect their way of life in an uncontrollable way was what the Métis feared most. Unfortunately, despite their wishes and acts civilization and progress eventually arrived to their settlement in the form of new settlers and the railway. The arrival of new settlers from the U.S. and eastern part of Canada disrupted yet so peaceful atmosphere. The newcomers aroused curiosity but at the same time apprehensions. Most of them did not intend to adapt to the Métis culture. Quite the opposite, having their own traditions and habits they looked down on the Métis and disregarded the established laws of Red River. As a result, hostilities between them arose. Such tensions did not arise immediately but gradually escalated in the course of the years (Melnyk 1992:69).

These disputes were only heralds of more severe events that were going to happen. The acquisition of North-West Territories was quite a logical and necessary step from the federal government point of view; but to the people of Red River it meant their transfer to a foreign government whose interests were very different from their own. Even the way of acquisition suggested what the future relationships between the Métis and the federal government would be. Regardless of the Métis origin they were simply considered as *savages*⁴ and thus nobody took account of their opinions on the transfer. Many of them

⁴Savage is a person that is not domesticated or under human control. Such a person also lacks the restraints normal to civilized human beings (merriam-webster.com).

disagreed with the decisions that had been made. However, as I have said before if it had not been for one person, they would have probably never stuck together as a nation. He represented someone the government did not expect (Melnyk, 1992:69).

LOUIS RIEL

4 The Beginnings of Resistance

4.1 The Biography of Louis Riel

Table No. 4 Louis Riel



This is a portrait of the Métis leader

Let me briefly introduce the life of a personality whose legacy is shrouded in mystery. As one of the most controversial figures in Canadian history, he earned various labels such as Louis Riel the traitor, hero, martyr, patriot, rebel and many more. Each of the labels had its justification. Besides, he is the founder of Manitoba, and he is also considered one of the fathers of Confederation. It seems that the fight for the right interpretation of his personality will never end. Even I dare to take such a step; however, I do not believe that there is something like "*the right interpretation*." Everybody brings their own perspective and this makes the research so interesting.

But, who did call him like that? For whom was he a hero? For the Métis, I would say, more than a hundred years ago, but now? Besides the Métis, many more people now believe that he was actually a hero. Similarly, there is a great number of those who think

he was a traitor. The key aim of my thesis is not to strictly determine that he was a hero or rebel, but to reach a compromise, if necessary.

4.1.1 Riel's Life

Louis Riel was born on October 23, 1844 in St. Boniface, Manitoba and died on November 16, 1885 in Regina, Saskatchewan. He grew up in the Red River settlement in present day Manitoba. He was the eldest of 11 children in devoutly religious and loving family. Although Riel's ancestry was only one eighths Native, he always considered and described himself as a Métis. Riel was intelligent by nature and this attribute significantly helped him in his career. While Riel was studying in the Catholic schools in St Boniface, Louis's brightness attracted the attention of Bishop Alexandre-Antonin Taché who arranged for Riel to attend school in Montreal in 1858. Riel expected to become a priest. He proved himself to be very diligent and talented for the career (biographi.ca).

However, everything changed when his father died. Riel, as the eldest child, probably felt that it was his duty to help the family and he stopped going to school. Unfortunately, his father had left the family in debt. Hoping to support his family Louis became a clerk in a Montreal law firm. Later on he changed his job several times and in 1868 he decided to return to the Red River settlement (www.britannica.com).

The Red River that Riel had left ten years earlier was an isolated society of English-speaking mixed-bloods called the country-born, Scottish settlers, and the French-speaking, Roman Catholic Métis. Riel found many changes when he returned. Religious antipathies had become a notable feature of the settlement. Protestant settlers from the East moved into the colony their obtrusive and aggressive ways leading the Roman Catholic Métis to fear for the preservation of their religion, land rights and culture. The political situation was also uncertain. In fact, what Riel found at Red River in July 1868 was an Anglo-Protestant Ontario community, hostile to Roman Catholicism and the social and economic values of the Métis. This severe situation caught Riel attention and he decided to act on behalf of his people (biographi.ca).

5 The Red River Resistance

This part aims on the first insurgency of the Métis that took place in the Red River Settlement. Specifically, I want to examine the reasons which led them to rise up, and special attention will be paid to the role Louis Riel in the whole conflict. What were the main causes of the resistance? What was the purpose of the Rebellion? Was it really a conflict between the primitive and civilized people as put by George Stanley? Was the Resistance beneficial? These questions will be answered in this chapter.

5.1 The East is Coming

Life of the Métis similarly to the Indians underwent significant changes, with the decrease in the number of buffaloes contributing to the decline in fur trade and generally to the poor standard of living. Moreover, during the years from 1867 to 1868 a grasshopper plague swept over the settlement. As a result, the Métis were distressed and almost on the verge of famine. Into this already poor situation came land surveyors sent by the Canadian Government to map out the land despite the fact they did not own the land yet. Obviously, they were not welcomed in the Red River Settlement, simply because the Métis thought that they came there to steal their lots to which most of them did not have titles. Although Ottawa intended to respect occupancy rights, no assurances were given by the government that this would be the case. (thecanadianencyclopaedia.com).

The main source of irritation to the settlement was the lack of consultation itself, and this became a key issue in the Métis struggle. (Another event that soon added fuel to the fire was an appointment of William McDougall as a lieutenant-governor. Not only was he well-known for his anti-French attitudes, but he was also an [Orangeman](#)⁵ and that worried the Métis most. Of course, his appointment was not a coincidence, Macdonald had chosen McDougall deliberately in hope McDougall would discourage them from heading west (Brown, 2006:13).

⁵A member of a secret society formed in the north of Ireland in 1795, having as its object the maintenance and political ascendancy of Protestantism.

5.2 The Métis Form a Provisional Government

As tensions mounted among the Métis, it was clear that strong leadership was needed. This is precisely the moment when Riel comes on the scene. His experience, education and the bilingual ability made him a perfect candidate for the leading post. Riel was ready to lead his people, compared to the older Métis leaders Riel had a spirit of initiative. At the same time, negotiations between the British and Canadian Government concerning the transfer of Rupert's Land to Canada were under way. Riel and his followers took a brave step when established provisional government which replaced the government of the Hudson's Bay Company (biographi.ca).

This action raises an important question. What were their expectations of the new government? The source of the initiative was a historical conflict which existed between the settlers and the Hudson's Bay Company over the lack of representation which existed under Company rule. The irony of the transfer was the fact that Canadian Rule would not change the situation; in fact, it was just an exchange of owners. So the key object of the Métis struggle became the establishment of the provisional government with the equal representation of the settlement that would be able to negotiate directly with the Canadian Government. They were willing to accept certain changes but only in a fashion and to a degree that would secure welfare and maintenance of their culture (curve.carleton.ca).

The deed as such has been examined many times and there are several contradictory opinions about it. For instance, W.L. Morton points out that it was an act of rebellion though the Métis denied this (Morton and Thomas, 1973:534). But was it truly the act of rebellion? As I have found out, had the transfer taken place, the Métis would have been fully justified according to International Law (bclearningnetwork.com). However, the Canadian government was a step ahead and managed to postpone the transfer. Although, in legal terms, they were rebels, they felt that they were not breaking any law. They acted in defence of their own liberty. Throughout the resistance Riel insisted that the Métis were loyal subjects of the queen. The illegality of the act consequently led to the lack of tolerance of the Anglo-Métis for the Franco-Métis. The Anglo-Métis stood against their

francophone counterpart not because of their previous dispute. They felt a legal obligation to do so (curve.carleton.ca).

As soon as Riel gained enough force he and a group of Métis stopped the land survey. A week later, the National Committee, with John Bruce as president and Riel as secretary, was formed. The committee took a resolute action and established a roadblock to prevent William McDougall from entering the Red River Settlement. Concurrently, the Committee seized Upper Fort Garry, which was both the geographical and strategic centre of the Red River Settlement (Stanley 1979:6). In my opinion, it was a nice move on Riel's part. The fort was considered as a strategic place and whoever controlled the fort controlled the whole colony.

McDougall, unaware that the Canadian Government had postponed the date of transfer, issued, in the name of Queen Victoria, a proclamation announcing the transfer of the North-West to Canada with his own appointment as Lieutenant-Governor, and also commissioned Colonel J.S. Dennis to raise a force to deal with the insurgents. Although the proclamation raised doubts in the settlement, his attempt fell short (Stanley 1979:10).

Negotiations with Macdonald did not go in the way Riel wanted. It seems that Macdonald completely misunderstood the real nature of the Métis grievances. He thought that the troubles in the settlement resulted from the French-Canadian Particularism, so he sent as peace messengers French speaking priest and soldier to negotiate. Nevertheless, Riel needed to negotiate with somebody who possessed real authority. In November a convention of Anglo and Franco-Métis took place whose main purpose was to create a united opposition to Canada. The Franco-Métis made it clear what they were attempting to do that is protection of their rights. However, the problem was that the English could not quite comprehend what those rights were (Stanley 1979:6). Riel commented on this development:

“We endeavoured frequently to bring them to the main point. But our plain question of, what do you want? was only met by declamation and harangue” (archive.org).

It is apparent from words that the English-speaking Métis did not have clear ideas as to what their role should be. The English rejected all demands proposed by Riel including the question of forming a Provisional Government and the List of Rights. Soon after that McDonald commissioned two delegates Donald Alexander Smith and Richard Charles Hardisty to negotiate with Riel and his council. During the negotiations Riel put emphasis on equal representation of English and French-speaking Métis and struggled for direct negotiations between the settlement and Canada. Eventually, Riel achieved almost everything he had hoped for because Smith declared a proposal which would entail direct negotiations between Canada and the settlement. At the next convention of the Métis, the committee that had drafted the List of Rights then established an assembly of 24 elected representatives drawn equally from the French-speaking and English-speaking parishes of the settlement. Riel was recommended to be the President (biographi.ca).

5.3 Execution of Thomas Scott

It might seem that the whole problem had been settled; however, there were still people who fiercely opposed the Métis. Among them belonged Charles Mair, Thomas Scott and John Christian Schultz. The three men had planned to attack Fort Garry. After they gathered around 50 men they set off to Fort Garry. Eventually, they changed their mind and decided to call off the attack. However, most of them chose to come back by the route close to the fort. The whole operation ended in fiasco and 48 Canadians were arrested including Thomas Scott. Eventually, they were released but Thomas Scott kept doing difficulties despite the fact he had been warned. Martial charged him of insubordination and later sentenced him to death (biographi.ca).

Louis Riel did not intervene and I personally consider this moment to be the biggest mistake Riel had ever made. Scott was a small-time, his death was meaningless, but his execution had immense consequences. The execution raised a wave of anger in Toronto, the biggest centre of Orangemen at the time. They literally started to lust for Riel's blood. I have one question in my head, why Riel? It is true that he was the one who appointed the tribunal to try Scott for treason and he could have cancelled the decision for execution, but was he among those who had made the decision? No, he was not. The Orangemen

seem to need focus their anger on a particular person and Riel as leader of the Métis became a scapegoat. If it hadn't been for the execution, I firmly believe that the course of the following events might have been different.

In April a delegation of Ritchot, Black and Scott set off for Ottawa to negotiate the List of Rights with J. A. Macdonald. All points of the List of Rights apart from the extent of the future province of Manitoba and provincial control of natural resources were approved. The results of the bargaining were embodied in the Manitoba Act of 1870. The Act created the province of Manitoba. The map of the province in 1870 is in the appendix. However, Ritchot failed to acquire the update of amnesty in written form and all that Ritchot could obtain was an oral assurance from Governor General. In May 1870 a military expedition had been dispatched to Red River under Colonel Garnet Joseph Wolseley, coming in peace. Riel learned that the soldiers were planning to lynch him, so he took refuge at St Joseph's mission, about ten miles south of the border in Dakota Territory, US. That was the end of the Resistance (biographi.ca).

Although Riel was on the run, he was elected a member of the Canadian Government's Parliament in 1873. He travelled to Ottawa; however, he did not have enough courage to attend the first sitting because he thought it was a trap. There was a 5,000 dollar reward for his capture. Riel delayed in taking his seat and was later expelled from the House. Moreover, an amnesty for all of the Métis was declared. The only exception was Riel (Brown, 2006: 101).

5.4 Was It Really a Conflict between the "Primitive" and "Civilized" People as Put by George Stanley?

The conflict as such has been analysed by many recognized experts which gives me an opportunity to compare their views on any topic. During my thorough search for such views, I managed to find out contradictory opinions as for the fundamental essence of the conflict. I will use a book written by George Stanley who considers the Red River Rising a cultural conflict between "civilized" and "primitive" people. The primitiveness of the Métis is built on the fact that they led semi-nomadic prairie life. Virtually, as a spark of

the resentment and consequent insurrection against Canada Stanley considers the inability of the Métis to adjust to the more advanced people pouring into the settlement. He also suggests that the arrival of "*civilization*", in the form of Canada, would bring with it increasing agricultural settlement which would result in the complete destruction of plains life (Stanley, 1992:26).

Such argument seems inaccurate to me because his interpretation would reduce the key object of the insurrection only to a struggle for the prohibition of the agricultural settlement so as to maintain their primitive way of life. It is true that the Métis wanted to keep their local customs, languages and everything else that was dear to them and part of their culture. However, I cannot see any primitiveness in it. They knew that the "*civilization*" was coming so they jumped at the chance to negotiate better conditions during the transfer. I think that, to a large extent, Stanley exaggerates their fear of being civilized. The 13th line in the Bill of Rights itself implies that they were not, in fact, so afraid of agriculture and "*civilization*". This is the 13th line from the Bill of Rights:

That there shall be guaranteed uninterrupted steam communication to Lake Superior, within five years; and also the establishment, by rail, of a connection with the American railway as soon as it reaches the international line (canadahistory.com).

This point plainly demands the connection of the settlement with the outside world by rail. By clear implication the opening of a railway line would inevitably lead to the economic intercourse with outside civilization. The Métis do not seem to have feared agriculture; but on the contrary, they encouraged it. Stanley also suggests that despite the cultural diversity between the Franco-Métis and Anglo-Métis, it was the fear of Canada and aversion to change they actually had in common.

In many ways, they were fearful of Canada. Nevertheless, the fear does not seem to stem from the presumed inability to adapt, but from the distrust of the indifferent Canadian Government that would inconsiderately assert only its interests at their expense. Riel stated:

“It is in the disposition of Canada to cheat. For my part I would like to see the power of Canada limited in this country. That is what I want I want this country to be governed for once by a Local Legislature” (<http://law2.umkc.edu/>).

In my opinion, Stanley's marking of the Métis as primitive is not so much based on the real facts as his need to put a label on them, in order to categorize them. His categorization gives me the impression that he based his interpretation on the fact that the Métis eventually lost their fight and were swallowed by the incoming settlers. What he is basically saying: "They were defeated by the more advanced East which gives the right to call them primitive" (Stanley, 1992:15). I completely disagree with it and I put some arguments which seek to prove their effort to adapt and accept the incoming East.

5.5 Was the Resistance Beneficial?

Provincehood was certainly victory, but Manitoba entered Confederation as a dependant member, not as a full partner within a federal system. I can give two explanations for their subordinate status. Federal authorities and the Métis leaders had entirely different concerns. The Métis put great emphasis on cultural problems connected with an influx of Ontarians and other settlers from the East. They found educational and linguistic guarantees particularly important, and demanded their fulfilment. On the other hand, the Canadian Government was primarily concerned with the settlement of the west and the construction of a transcontinental railway (Melnik, 1992: 70,71).

During the negotiation with the provisional government delegates, Macdonald took a very smart step of retaining control of Manitoba's public lands. It later became Ottawa's most powerful instrument crucial for the Canadianization of the West, besides the source of new problems in Manitoba. The most important is the fact that Manitoba was not sufficiently equipped both financially and politically as a province. She was too small and depended mainly on the grants from the federal government. Moreover, improper financial terms designed for the older provinces were given to Manitoba, which represented a huge financial load for the small provincial budget. Her subordinate status,

as will be seen, became the cause of many issues that gave grounds for another rebellion (Melnyk, 1992: 70,71).

6 Riel's Alleged Insanity

In terms of my topic I would like to dwell on the question of Riel's insanity around which many contradictory opinions abound. Some would call him a prophet, others a lunatic and madman. The essence of madness was mainly associated with his struggle to establish a new religion in North America and the megalomania related to it. To my mind, there is no definite answer to this question and I do not intend to elaborate on this. However, I believe that the understanding to his religious beliefs is the key to the understanding to all his steps he had taken and would take and the logic of his thinking. Another question to which I would like to find the answer is: Was his insanity pretended to protect his people?

6.1 Louis "David" Riel?

The central concept in Riel's thinking was that of mission derived from his belief in Providence. Riel's view of his mission is summarized in the signature he sometimes used in Beauport Asylum: 'Louis "David" Riel: Prophet, Priest-King, Infallible Pontiff.' These all were symbols of the divine power which would intervene to compensate Riel and his people for their sufferings, to punish their enemies and reward their friends (Flanagan, 1983:74).

It is not clear whether Riel had started using the name David simply as the alias to avoid detection of his true identity or had attached to it any mystical significance from the very beginning. I was wondering what had led him to choose the name David, the King of Israel. As I have found out, Riel saw numerous resemblances between himself and David. Both had experienced unexpected youthful success against formidable obstacles. Both had been taken by others to be insane and both had been forced to flee from the power of government. Riel also believed that there was an ingenious genealogical similarity between David and himself. He was seven-eighths French Canadian and one-eighth

Indian. David was seven-eighths Hebrew and one-eighth *Gentile*⁶. Moreover, Riel assumed, according to a tale he had heard, that the Indians of North America were actually descendants of the Hebrews. Thus he believed that his genealogy was a mirror image of David's. David represented a model for Riel because he had been most of the things that Riel wanted to be. He had been prophet, priest and king (Stanley, 1983:76).

It is not known whether the tale about the origin of the Indians was true or not; however, for Riel this fact played an important place in his system of ideas because it provided him a link between the first chosen people and the last. Riel considered the Métis as the last chosen people who would continue with spreading Catholic religion in North America. Riel admired the Hebrews so much that he proposed to adopt their moral code, the Mosaic Law. What he liked about the law was the all-embracing subordination to divine will. As an antiliberal he believed that his conception would serve as a conservative wall against liberalism. For Riel, liberalism meant a life of individual self-indulgence whereas his conception of new order was theocratic, of a community of godly persons living under the united regime of church and state, directed by a priest-king (Flanagan, 1983:95).

Nevertheless, despite the struggle and dedication, his attempts to set up a new religion failed. No one except himself took his concept seriously. His ideas and behaviour were too bizarre to others. He proposed extreme ideas such as the institution of incest and polygamy, so it is not surprising that very few people sympathized with him. Not only was it scandalous for some people but it also related more to Riel's internal needs. To some extent his religion was meant to glorify his personality. That is why he used titles such as prophet, pontiff and king. Only a few days after he had revealed his mission, people began to treat him like a madman. On the 6th of March 1876 he was taken to an asylum in Montreal. He was discharged from the asylum after almost two years. One would think that the stay in the asylum would discourage him from his faith in his own mission, but Riel did not give upon his dream. He considered his humiliation as the will of God (Flanagan, 1983:97).

⁶ <http://www.gotquestions.org/what-is-a-Gentile.html>

6.2 A Subtle Plan

Not having received support in his country he decided to seek help for his cause in the United States. Even though he had many plans, he wanted to stay out of public life. He rented several acres of land and lived as a farmer for some time in Keeseville US. Riel desperately needed money to make his plans happen. From the fragmented evidence it was found out that Riel was considering armed invasion of the Canadian West. He hoped to find support from the Irish leaders of *Fenians*⁷, who were released from prison. But when he explained them his plans they laughed at his offer (Flanagan, 1983:101).

To re-establish his reputation as a leader he created a new plan. Another possible ally Riel saw in some of the Indian tribes. He had always dreamt of native unity between the Métis and the Indians. Fundamentally, it was a very subtle plan because such an alliance would have been so powerful that no one could stand against it, certainly not the few hundred Mounted Police. Although the plan seemed promising, it failed again for many reasons. Many Indians tribes as we know were in a desperate situation, the number of buffaloes decreased considerably and they were becoming more and more dependent on the support by the Canadian government. Riel offered them the same thing as to the Fenians, the establishment of a *native republic*. He also promised to recover their lands, if they united under his leadership. Some of the tribes made an agreement with him, however, there were also individuals who kept a close eye on all Riel's steps and consequently tried to convince the tribes to withdraw from the agreements. In many cases they were successful. Unlike the Métis who venerated Riel for his role in the Red River Rebellion, the Indians looked at him suspiciously. Especially the smarter of the chiefs such as Sitting Bull, Big Bear and Crowfoot sensed that Riel wanted to use the Indians as human raw material for his own projects (Flanagan, 1983:102).

As I have noticed, since Riel had been discharged from the asylum he acted very cleverly and cautiously. Obedient and loyal to the Catholic Church on the surface, but inside he

⁷Fenians were members of a movement started in 1857 to secure Irish independence from Britain. The term Fenian comes from the Irish Gaelic term *Fianna*. Later on, they invaded Canada.

never stopped believing in his mission. He decided to confide his true intentions only in people he thought would support him. If his persuasion of Indian tribes and Fenians had been successful, it would have had a significant impact on the political development in Canada. It would have been very easy with such military forces to deal with mounted police that consisted of a few hundred soldiers.

6.3 Insanity as a Trick?

All Riel's doings in the period between the Red River Rebellion and North-West Rebellion, and the period that preceded to Riel's placement into the asylum brings me to a question whether his, for many, exaggerated conception and label of a madman had not been done intentionally to protect his own people.

I managed to find a dialogue between Riel and Canadian lawyer Joseph Dubuc in which Riel stated that he had pretended to go insane so that he would no longer seem capable of leading his people. He expected the government would stop persecuting the Métis, who were no threat without his leadership. Nevertheless, as Dubuc says Riel's story was just a fabrication, because there is not the slightest evidence in all of Riel's writing to suggest that he simulated madness. The probable reason for this statement might have been an attempt to shield his reputation, because he did not wish the Métis to think that his sanity had ever been in doubt (Brown, 2006: 101).

6.4 The Canadian Government Want Him Dead?

Another thing worth mentioning is that quite paradoxically it was not his enemies who strove to show that he was really insane but his friends and allies (Brown, 2006: 105). That brings me to the idea that either Riel's greatest nemesis — the Government with Macdonald as the Prime Minister — did not take into account the possible consequences for Riel, as Riel did, or they deliberately ignored this fact. To make it straight: if Riel had been proved to be insane, all his deeds would have been considered as deeds of a madman which would have definitely ruined him and his reputation as a leader. The following lines are excerpted from Riel's speech during his trial which prove my surmise to be true.

“Even if I was going to be sentenced by you, Gentlemen of the Jury, I have this satisfaction that if I die, I will not be reputed by all men as insane, as a lunatic” says Riel (<http://law2.umkc.edu/>).

The second option would indicate that the Government and Macdonald primarily rather than for justice strove for revenge which meant in this case Riel's life. In retrospect, their decision seems even more paradoxical because his execution had, in fact, the opposite impact they had expected.

In conclusion, I cannot assert for certain whether he was insane or not as I have not lived in the times he did and I did not know him personally. After all, this was not the aim of this chapter. The main goal was to find whether his religious beliefs were related to the Métis. The Métis turn out to play a crucial role in his system of ideas and he subordinates them all to his efforts. What came to me as a surprise was the fact that his visions did not concern only the Métis but also his own passions and desires stemming probably from his childhood. Although his ideas might appear extreme even from the present point of view, they were, in fact, elaborated in its essence and feasible from the practical point of view. The main point was to help his people who faced imminent destruction of their way of life. He tried to create a new identity, a new life and better future for them. Flanagan says that his insanity was actually a message of hope and I can fully identify with this idea (Cuthand; Flanagan 1977:35).

7 The North-West Rebellion of 1885

Similarly to the chapter The Red River Resistance, I want to concentrate here on the main causes of the rebellion. Particular attention will be paid to Louis Riel and his strategy. Unfortunately, the lack of space does not allow me to cover all the events in the rebellion. Nevertheless, all additional information about the resistance and its consequences are explained in the Appendix.

7.1 The Rebellion as a Culmination of a Struggle

During the Manitoba rising Riel achieved many objectives he had set, so the rising can be considered as a success. Sadly, nobody had given legal assurances to the Métis as to land titles that would enable them to compete with the influx of settlers. In a few years from the resistance their lands would be literally swallowed up by them. Hoping that in the west the life would be better, many of them sold their scrip and founded new settlements in Saskatchewan. To their disappointment, it did not take long and the situation there was the same as in Manitoba. The cause of the rebellion seems obvious: a conflict of cultures (Stanley, 1979:21).

At first sight it might seem that the causes of the risings were identical, but in this case the roots were more extensive. White settlers was another group who paid the price for Macdonald's politics which had a devastating impact on their livelihood. It was the wretched white settlers of the North Saskatchewan, who along with both groups of the Métis, joined together to bring Louis Riel back from the U.S. to help them redress their grievances. Rather than out of compassion, the settlers did it in their own interest in hope to make the indifferent Canadian Government act. Riel accepted the invitation and grasped the role of an agitator very well. He addressed the Métis as well as the white settlers which was, in my opinion, quite a logical step. He drafted a petition that included listing of many grievances and demands such as more liberal treatment for the Indians, land patents for the Métis and a railway to Hudson's Bay for the white settlers. Although Macdonald did not pay much attention to it, he welcomed the arrival of Riel. In case uprising erupted, he would have someone to blame (biography.ca).

Yet, lack of response from the federal government and continued delays led to frustration among the Métis. At the same time, the winter was difficult, especially for the Indians on reserves where starvation and disease were rampant. Given the situation, Riel turned to a more active but dangerous strategy. George Stanley called it "*A scheme of a madman.*" He decided to form a Provisional Government, then put his supporters under arms and force the federal authorities to revise the terms under which the North-West came into the Confederation (Stanley, 1979:29). On the one hand, a bold deed that had proved successful before, but was it enough with regard to the circumstances?

Most likely not, and some examples can be given to prove that. First of all, there was an established military force to support the Canadian Government where there had been none in 1869 to support the Hudson's Bay Company. There was a railway infrastructure able to bring arms and soldiers in a very short time whereas during the first Rebellion it had taken weeks. By ignoring these conditions, Riel started a fight destined to fail (Stanley, 1979:28).

But why did he follow the same strategy? One of the possible answers could be: He did not have a contingency plan and simply lost patience while negotiating with the Government. But more probable, in my opinion, is that Riel chose such strategy because he firmly believed in support (even military) from the groups that participated in negotiations with the Métis. If they had been united, it would not have most likely ended up as bloodshed. I believe that the Mounted Police would not have risked such a clash.

The details of the rebellion can be found in the Appendix. In short, Riel's plan fell through and the Métis were eventually, as well as the Indians, defeated. Riel was arrested soon after the last battle and subsequently charged with high treason.

7.2 Trial and Execution of Louis Riel

Now I am getting to the event that seems the most controversial one. The trial as such is a vast topic involving many controversies, each of which requires a thorough analysis. Thus I am not able to cover them all. Was it a fair or biased process compared to the others who were sentenced for treason? That is my question for this chapter. To answer

my question, I will use a book written by Thomas Flanagan which uses statistic figures of trials: *The Riel Trial Revisited: Criminal Procedure and the Law in 1885*.

7.2.1 Comparison with Other Treason Trials

Was the sentence executed unusually quickly? This question is critical for determining whether Riel's trial was typical or unusual. In popular Canadian mythology, "Riel was hurried to the gallows by bigoted Orangemen." But was it truly like that? For the comparison Flanagan used two hundred and forty-six British and Canadian trials for high treason. As for the length of the process, Riel's trial did not exceed the standard. The only unique aspect of Riel's trial was the time taken to carry out the sentence. One hundred and seven days compared to the average time of twenty-five days (tom-flanagan.ca).

7.2.2 Venue and Composition of the Jury

The venue represented a major issue at Riel's trial. An example of a theory supporting the statement that the trial was biased is the book *The Telegrams of the North-West Campaign* by D. Morton and R. H. Roy. They point out the fact that the government first sent Riel to Winnipeg where he supposed to have been tried, but a few days later they changed their mind and sent him to Regina. According to Morton and Roy, the Manitoba venue was rejected because there Riel could have demanded a mixed jury, i.e. half English and French (tom-flanagan.ca).

Nonetheless, Flanagan successfully disproves the theory by saying that rather than from a determination to fix the trial to a particular place in order to deprive Riel of French Jurors, they did it out of confusion and inability to reach a consensus in the cabinet. The act of 1880 which regulated the judiciary in the North-West allowed to try Riel anywhere within the North-West Territories. As for the composition of the jury, the panel was selected from a considerable geographical dispersion. It is not surprising that no French-speaking person was chosen because most of the French settlements in the Territories lay further west (tom-flanagan.ca).

The above mentioned facts indicate that from the judicial perspective the trial was fair. Personally, I am a little surprised by the outcome because what seemed to have been a

political process at first sight was a regular trial. What makes Flanagan's objective historical approach even more believable is the fact that it is based mainly on statistic figures (tom-flanagan.ca). This outcome convinced me that the trial was regular, but obviously I cannot rely on it on 100%. As Flanagan said "They were lucky that it all happened in accordance with the law, because they certainly did not have things under control" (tom-flanagan.ca).

7.3 Riel's Legacy and the Current Standing of the Métis People

In the long run the execution of Louis Riel and the racial bitterness led to a profound revolution in Canadian politics. As a result, the crisis of 1885, Quebec, the most conservative province in the Dominion of Canada, swung over to the Liberal party. A change in political allegiance which was cemented by the selection of a French Canadian, Wilfred Laurier, as a leader of the party. Francophones realised that they had been excluded from the process of western development. Naturally, they believed that they had the same rights and duties as Anglophones. Consequently, they started to demand equal rights for Francophones within the new provinces. The events of 1869 and 1885 galvanized a bilingual theory of Confederation which does not appear to have been present in the minds of French Canadians at the time of Confederation. To a certain extent, French enmity toward the execution of Riel has persisted into present day (Stanley, 1979:112).

The years that followed after the insurgency were literally devastating for the Métis. They were caught between two worlds and not welcome in either. Because of their rebel background they were denied full membership in the Canadian mainstream. They were also denied status as Indians under the Indian Act. In this position they became completely politically powerless. Education as well as access to reserves were denied. Moreover, the Métis who took part in the rebellion or were somehow connected to it were marginalized even more (umanitoba.ca).

At a certain point the government seemed to deliver its promise to give the non-participants in the conflict a scrip of land. However, whether by clumsiness or intentionally, many of these Métis never received their scrip. Over 90 percent of scrips

issued to Métis ended up in the hands of bankers, lawyers, speculators, and financial institutions. More and more Métis were then left to live on unused portions of land. They were called *Road Allowance People*⁸ for they most often were obliged to make their settlements on the government land on either side of the road. From Macdonald point of view, this was the he wanted to have the Métis in that is landless and powerless (biography.ca).

Significant changes in terms of changing nature of the Government came in the period after the Second World War. Significant in terms of the changing nature of the Government. In the 1960s appeared advisory Councils which were Federally appointed to help the Indians. Initially a movement on the fringes of political life soon developed into a cultural movement with strong political overtones among the first Nations. In Métis communities the process was slower but just as dramatic. New research contributed to the different perception of the Métis who were no longer depicted as rebels. Thanks to many cultural programs the Métis started regaining pride in themselves and reaffirmed who they were and where they had come from. Finally, after almost a hundred years the Métis started regaining political and cultural voice in the form of the Manitoba Métis Federation which was founded in 1967. In 1982, also the Assembly of First Nations was created which aims at protection of the aboriginal and treaty rights and interests of First Nations in Canada. The present president is Perry Bellegarde.

In my opinion, the biggest problem the Métis face today is their recognition. When you look at the official definition of the Métis, there are several of them. Although the main purpose is to provide a clear idea of who they are, rather it causes confusion and disunity. They want to be recognised in public but they are oftentimes not recognisable from the non-Native people. I think that it will take a long time to tackle this confusion, if at all.

It could be said that despite the fact Riel struggled to make the Métis lives better, he only brought misery upon them. However, I do not think that the Métis perceived it like that. He managed to pass on to them values that remained in existence up to the present and

⁸ http://www.ucobserver.org/pogue_blog/2013/05/road_allowance/

what is more important he fought for their rights. On the contrary, I believe they are grateful for everything he had done for them. Several statues of him were built in Winnipeg as a sign of gratitude and national public commemoration of his life and the struggles he led. In 2008 the Manitobans were even granted day off to celebrate Louis Riel's day on the third Monday of February. He has been honoured that is for sure. But has he been honoured enough? Hasn't he deserved more? Numerous demands for his retroactive pardon have been made, but neither has been successful. It seems that his image has changed over 131 years but not enough to take the final step. I think that it is considered by many as a too radical step that would change deeply rooted history. I believe that this is the problem of contemporary Canada. Confused national identity, the unwillingness to accept the fact that the Indians as well as the Métis are an integral part of Canadian history and culture. "The Aboriginals should be internalised as the senior founding pillar of our civilization" says John Ralston Saul in his book *Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada* (Saul, 2008). It is a very interesting idea and truthful in many respects. I think that the Canadians should be grateful to the Aboriginals for who they are. Louis Riel played a very important role in this regard and his multicultural and bilingual efforts should be more appreciated.

7.4 A Landmark Decision: Will It Bring a Better Future for the Métis?

As already stated in the Introduction, an important decision has been passed in late April 2016. Canada's 600,000 Métis and non-status Indians have been given Indian aboriginal status under the Constitution by the Supreme Court of Canada. This is a huge reconciliation step forward for the Métis. It has taken 15 years to make the final decision, though. Both federal and provincial governments have denied having legislative authority over the non-status Indians and Métis, leaving hundreds of thousands of people in a "jurisdictional wasteland." This fact has had significant and disadvantaging consequences for them because they were deprived of many government benefits (globalnews.ca).

The ruling allows the Métis and non-status Indians to negotiate with the federal government for some of the same rights and benefits granted aboriginal people living on reserves. These include hunting and fishing privileges, tax breaks and assistance with

medication, housing and education. The ruling means the federal government now has an obligation to negotiate or consult on their rights, which is especially important when it comes to natural resources. For example, if an oil company wants access to a Métis settlement, the government must provide consultations or mediation. In the words of Ron Quintal, president of the Fort McKay Metis Community in Alberta, “This is going to allow us to have an actual voice where industry and government have no choice but to work with our people” (globalnews.ca).

The ruling is definitely a starting point but I think it will likely take years for the Métis and non-status Indians to access the social programs and services currently granted to status Indians. The Supreme Court’s decision hasn’t mapped out how specific individuals or full communities will now be able to qualify as “Indians,” stating it will be decided on a “case-by-case basis in the future.” My further comment on this issue can be found in the conclusion (globalnews.ca).

8 Conclusion

At the beginning I would like to state that writing this thesis was pleasant for me. The most satisfying fact is that I managed to answer both my main question and sub-questions. Was Louis Riel a hero or villain? That was my main question. My hypothesis was that he was a villain and deserved to be punished. Throughout my research I tried to stay objective and only absorbed various opinions related to the topic in order to get a clear picture of him and the whole story. As it turned out, my hypothesis was confirmed. In both The Red River Resistance and Northwest Rebellion Riel along with other Métis broke the law. In legal terms they were truly guilty, but only Riel was punished.

It seems that the Canadian Government used him as a scapegoat in order to sweep the whole incident under the carpet. Insight into Riel's trial from Flanagan's perspective convinced me of the fact that the trial was not biased, as many had believed. This was the most surprising fact for me, because the trial appeared to be the most controversial. He was a rebel but did he deserve to be hanged? As some of the jurors stated after the trial: "We tried him for treason, but he was hanged for the murder of Thomas Scott." The irony is that he does not seem to be responsible for that person's death as I have stated before but the committee entitled to try T. Scott. Therefore, I do not believe Riel deserved to die.

At the beginning I wished to find a clear answer to the main question, but as I immersed myself more into the topic I realised that the whole issue was much more complicated. Thus, I could not make do with a one-sided answer. What I wanted to find out was Riel's contribution to the Métis cause. From the beginning till the end he struggled tenaciously to make the situation of the Métis better. He succeeded in setting up a Provisional Government and negotiated multiple rights for the Métis. I think that his biggest contribution were the guarantees he gained for the Métis. Thanks to him they gained control over the territory they lived in. By this step, he ensured the survival of their customs and languages. Despite the fact that the creation of Manitoba is considered by many as a premature step, I believe it was carried out at the right moment. I assume that later it would not have been possible.

He did all he could but the fight with the Canadian Government was like tilting at windmills. I think that the second rebellion was a failure and made the situation of the Métis even worse. Riel had had two options before the rebellions started: to fight or to escape again and live a peaceful life in America. He had chosen the first option which I consider as the most remarkable thing about it. He had given preference to his people, all in the belief that it was his mission to fulfil. I see Riel's mission as a message of hope which has been passed down from generation to generation. I believe he is a true hero a role model not only for the Métis but for whole Canada.

The Métis finally got their rights they had been fighting for so long. It has taken the Supreme Court 15 years to make the decision. However, the Métis had been fighting longer than this. It sounds like a happy ending; however, now it is up to them how they will take their opportunity. Certainly, the Supreme Court's decision represents a crucial step forward, but is it really a victory? The Indians had been "granted" the same rights in 1876, but from the historical point of view it does not seem to be a victory for them. I put granted into inverted commas because the granted rights were often neglected. Despite the fact that the rights are officially guaranteed in the Constitution, they were and are, in fact, subordinate to the interests of the Canadian Government. The Canadian government is bound by the Supreme Court's decisions; however not fully. In practice, the government is known to be stalling or playing the delaying tactics as so much is at stake.

Nowadays, the biggest problem can be seen in the conflict of interest. Canada's economy is mainly based on exploitation of natural resources and the Aboriginals often inhabit lands rich in these resources. The Government often interferes in the Aboriginal lives and source of livelihood only in order to make a profit. The Métis expect this situation to change through negotiations. Although under the current government of Justin Trudeau the Aboriginal situation has started improving, it is uncertain how long this government will last.

I really wish the Métis all the best in their struggle, but only time will tell whether the ruling is truly landmark or not.

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Manitoba

The following picture shows typical farmland in the Red River Settlement. The characteristic feature is the shape of the fields, usually long stretches of land close water sources. The Métis took over this way of farming from their French descendants.

When the surveyors came to the settlement, they started to survey the land in a different manner. They used English survey system based on small squares of land. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Métis feared of losing their land. It looked as if they were stealing from them and in many cases it was true.

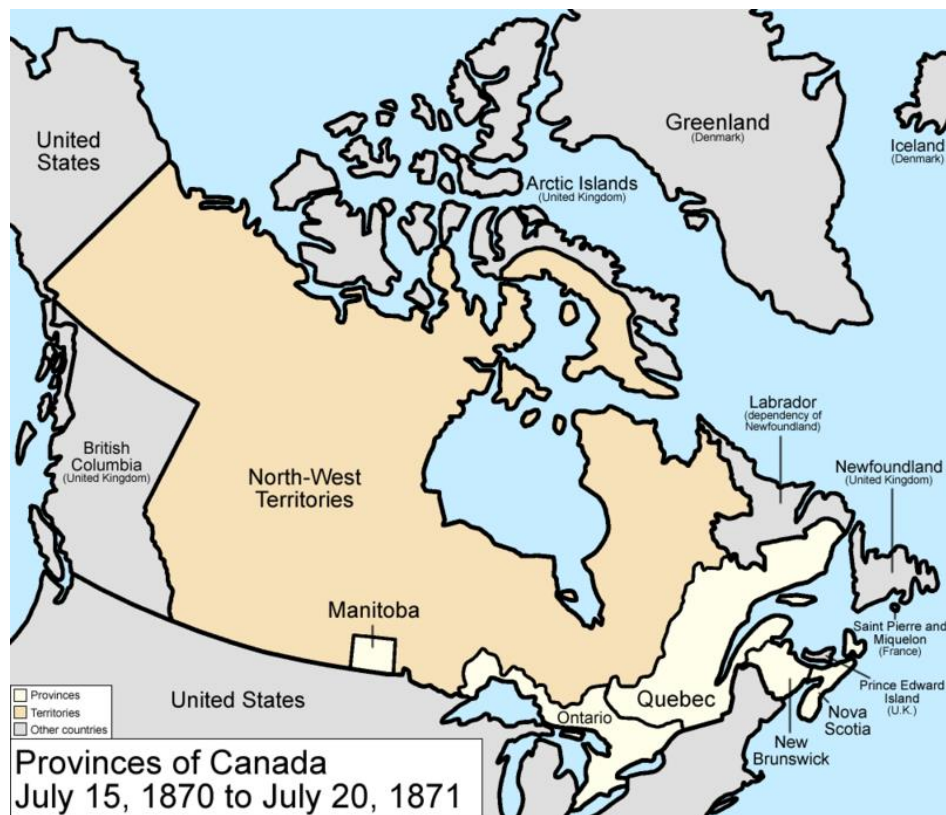
Table No. 5 Farmland in the Red River Settlement



(firstpeopleofcanada.com)

The maps below show the difference between Manitoba in 1870 and the present-day Manitoba. Her boundaries, along with Quebec and Ontario, were expanded in 1912.

Table No. 6 Manitoba in 1870



(wordpress.stgeorges.bc.ca)

Table No. 7 Present-day Manitoba



(wordpress.stgeorges.bc.ca)

The Northwest Rebellion: From Agitation to Rebellion

During the feast of St. Joseph, the patron saint of the Métis. Métis from nearby settlements gathered in Batoche carrying rifles with them. This was an opportunity for Riel and he took advantage of it. Riel told them in his rousing speech that the Mounted Police were preparing to attack them and suppress their movement. A Provisional Government was immediately proclaimed. Pierre Parenteau was elected president, however, the real leaders were Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel himself. Riel with a group of his followers took possession of a church as their headquarters (Stanley, 1979:112). An important question is coming into consideration: Were the Métis supported by the other groups?

In short, they were not. The whites might have been willing to use the Métis for their own purposes but participation in the rebellion represented too radical step for them. The English-speaking Métis likewise wanted to support Riel as far as constitutional agitation. *"Gentlemen, please do not remain neutral," "A strong union between the French and English Métis is the only guarantee that there will be no bloodshed"* Riel appealed to them. Sadly, his appeals met with no response. The only group that left were the Indians. They found themselves in even more desperate situation than the Métis. Starving and hopeless some of them turned to Riel for advice during the autumn of 1884. From them at least he might hope for support in arms (Stanley, 1979:45).

The Military Events of March-June 1885

It all seemed to boil to a head at a place called Duck Lake on March 26 1885, where Gabriel Dumont and the Métis ambushed the force of Mounted Police and managed to compel them to abandon Fort Carlton. Further West the Crees of Poundmaker broke into the Hudson's Bay Company store and other buildings in the town of Battleford. The attack as such does not seem to be directed at the city, it was rather an attempt to get some food supplies. Further up the Saskatchewan the Crees of Big Bear murdered several men at Fish at Frog Lake. During descending the Saskatchewan River, they terrified the inhabitants of Fort Pitt who gave up and left the fort. Everywhere the Métis and Indians had come they met with success (Stanley, 1979:25).

It would be wrong to think that the sequence of events was a result of a complex plan. Most of it happened spontaneously and by coincidence. Their Many of the Indian nations had taken neutral position and simply waited. To ensure their neutrality, the Government more specifically, the Indian Department, provided the Indians with free gifts. The tendency to protect only their own interests made the Indians incapable of cooperation. On the other hand, the Métis were organized but they were not equipped for leading a long war. Meanwhile, the Government had taken action and sent 8000 soldiers to Saskatchewan under the command of General Frederick Middleton (biography.ca).

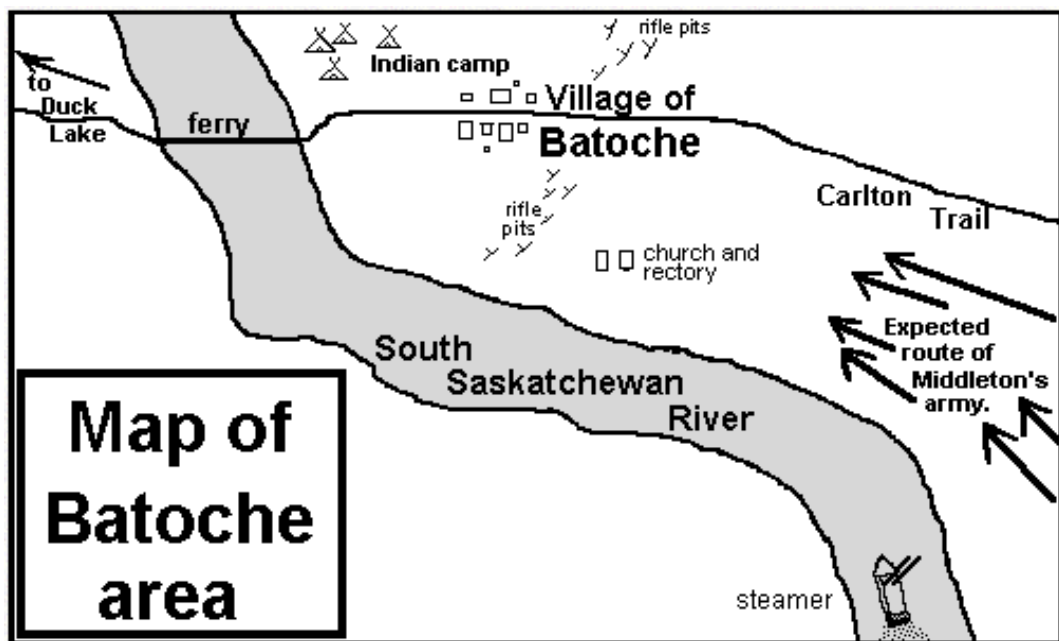
The army was divided into three columns against the centres of insurgency. Each column had its general. Middleton himself directed his army against Riel's capital at Batoche. He clashed with the Métis at Fish Creek on April 24th. Although the Métis were outnumbered, Middleton's army consisted mainly of unskilled soldiers who proved themselves maladroit in the battle. At this time, Riel was still hoping he could negotiate a peace settlement. He wrote in his personal diary: "Oh how hard it is to wage war! O my God! Guide me, help me in war, that I may have the good fortune to conclude a peace, an honourable peace before God and Men."⁹ However, Riel waited, and he never did get a chance to negotiate. The Métis were eventually forced to withdraw (biography.ca).

Riel found himself in a desperate situation, in a bid to concentrate all his forces he withdrew Métis soldiers to Batoche. Meanwhile, other two generals Otter and Strange attacked Big Bear and Poundmaker. Middleton began to move from Fish Creek towards Batoche. However, their first attack ended in fiasco. G. Dumont had constructed a number of trenches for the riflemen which turned out to be a brilliant strategy. For three days the fighting at Batoche continued. The Métis supplies were almost exhausted. The Middleton's troops became sick of general's cautious tactics and took matters into their hands. The Métis were caught by surprise and could not resist. Many of them fled into the woods. Riel gave up on May 15th, Gabriel Dumont and several others fled to the US. It was not long before the Indians were defeated as well. Poundmaker surrendered to

⁹ Stanley, G. F. G. *The Birth of Western Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961

Middleton on May 23rd and Big Bear to general Strange a few days later. The consequences for the Indians were not as harsh as for the Métis. Some of the leaders went to the gallows, others including Big Bear and Poundmaker went to prison. The Indians who participated in the rebellion were deprived of their annuities and their horses and rifles were taken from them. However, in 1866 a general amnesty was declared for all who were not under sentence, and in the following year Big Bear and Poundmaker were released from prison (Stanley, 1979:24).

Table No. 8 The Battle of Batoche



The picture above shows the attack of Middleton's army (in the right corner) against the Métis who entrenched themselves in the village of Batoche (library.usask.ca)

Table No. 9 Big Bear



The picture taken after his arrest (library.usask.ca)