

The Riel Rebellions

The period immediately following Confederation was a particularly volatile one on the Canadian Prairies, particularly in the old Red River Settlement region that would soon come to be known as Manitoba. The leader of two major rebellions in the Canadian West was a Métis named Louis Riel, who encouraged his fellow mixed-bloods to stand up for their rights through armed conflict. His tactics would work during one rebellion, but fail miserably in another – leading to both his downfall and, indirectly, the downfall of Aboriginal leaders who sided with him.

Red River Rebellion, 1869 – 1870

Many Ontarians wanted to push settlement west after Confederation and began to pressure the federal government to take the steps to make that possible. The first step, the purchase of the Hudson's Bay Company territories in 1868, raised many hopes. Often, the most vocal for this settlement were members of the Orange Order and the Canada First movement, anti-Catholic groups that cared little for the mainly French-speaking population of Métis or the Aboriginals who lived on the land already. Combined, there were almost 100,000 who lived in the region.

Alarmed by the possibility that they might be pushed off their land along the Red and Assiniboine rivers, the Métis (led by Riel) prevented the appointed Canadian governor from entering the territory in 1869 and seized Fort Garry. Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald realized that a military response was impossible for several reasons:

- The distances to be covered by any military force were enormous, and there was as yet no rail service west.
- It was the middle of winter, making such an action even more improbable.
- The British had not yet ratified the transfer of the territories to Canada, so the Métis had not, in fact, broken any Canadian laws.

After negotiations, the province of Manitoba was created in 1870, with several controversial provisions included:

- The land already occupied would not be taken from the Métis, and a large section of land was reserved for them.
- There was a provision for denominational schools.
- French was to be a language of debate.

Supporting documents in Early Canadiana Online:

Manitoba Act, 1870

URL: http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/mtq?display=9_03428+0669

(This act creates Manitoba as a province in Confederation)

Manitoba Boundaries Extension Act, 1881

URL: http://www.canadiana.org/citm/_textpops/constitution/man_bound_ext_act_e.html

(Replaces Section 1 of the Manitoba Act, 1870, with a provision extending Manitoba's provincial boundaries)

However, the Métis would imprison a number of Canadians at Fort Garry during its seizure in 1869. Under Riel's command, they executed an Ontario Orangeman named Thomas Scott after he escaped from jail and tried to start a counter-rebellion amongst Scottish settlers.

The federal government sent troops during the summer of 1870 to show support for Adams Archibald, Manitoba's new lieutenant-governor, and to appease Ontarians who were upset at Scott's execution.

Riel fled to the United States briefly fearing arrest, but he returned to Canada by 1871. He was granted an amnesty for his involvement in 1875, provided that he live in exile for five years. He spent some of this time in various mental institutions in Québec.

North-West Rebellion, 1885

In July 1884, Riel settled in Batoche, which is now in Saskatchewan. This community was the major Métis farming settlement in the unorganized part of the West known at the time as the North-West Territories. Riel had been asked a month earlier by these Métis to help them petition Ottawa in regards to various grievances they had at the time.

In December 1884, the federal government acknowledged its receipt of the petition and promised to investigate.

By early 1885, Riel, believing that he was on a mission from God, decided to make a grand gesture to prove his points and win support. He seized the parish church in Batouche in March 1885 with an armed group of Métis. They used the church to form a provisional government, and demanded the surrender of nearby Fort Carlton.

However, the conditions in 1885 no longer favoured the Métis as they had in 1869:

- Louis Riel's mental state had deteriorated, affecting his leadership and decisions.
- The North-West Mounted Police had become a well-established presence in the West by the 1880s.
- The Canadian Pacific Railway – which could quickly bring in new military supplies and fresh personnel, if needed – was almost complete.

Fighting between the police and the Métis lasted barely two months before Riel was forced to surrender. He was charged with treason in June 1885, and, despite strong opposition from Québec and doubts about his sanity, he was hanged in November that year.

Unfortunately, this incident also cost the lives of Aboriginal leaders Big Bear and Poundmaker, who were implicated with Riel in the rebellion. Various militant Aboriginals in their nations participated in skirmishes with police and military forces, so these leaders were found guilty of treason despite the fact that they often tried to quell militant factions during battle.

While both Big Bear and Poundmaker were not executed, they were sentenced to short, but harsh, jail terms. In prison, their spirits were broken and they contracted diseases. Though they were released early, they would both die from disease soon after leaving jail.

The Canadian government also hanged eight lesser-known Aboriginals for treason because of their involvement in the rebellion. The message from the federal government was clear: it simply would not tolerate what it considered to be acts of treachery.

For more information on the Riel Rebellions, visit:

- the Canadian Encyclopedia online.
URL: http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?TCE_Version=A