Louis Riel & the Metis

Red River Rebellion (1869)
Northwest Rebellion (1885)

Required Reading/Viewing for this Unit

- Canada's History: Voices and Visions
  - Page 210-212
- The Canadian Encyclopedia
- Louis Riel
- CBC Archives
  - Re-Thinking Riel (Rebellion on the Red)
  - Re-Thinking Riel (Northwest Rebellion)
- Links to Internet sites (can be found on the History 621 page on the blog.)
Who are the Metis?

- In Riel’s time the Metis were people descended from French speaking voyageurs and the Aboriginal women they took as wives.

Riel was Metis by way of his great-grandmother, a Chippewa woman named Marie Joseph LeBlanc. All Riel’s ancestors on his mother’s side were white. Riel was, therefore, one eighth native.

A Brief Background

- The Red River Rebellion or Red River Resistance are the names given to the events surrounding the actions of a provisional government established by Metis leader Louis Riel in 1869 at the Red River Settlement in what is now the Canadian province of Manitoba.

Confederation Crisis

- The Rebellion was the first crisis John A. Macdonald’s new government faced following Canadian Confederation in 1867.
The Canadian government bought Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869 and appointed an English-speaking governor, William McDougall.

He was opposed by the French-speaking inhabitants of the Red River Settlement, which was part of Rupert's Land.

McDougall sent out surveyors to the Red River Settlement to sub-divide it before Rupert's Land was officially transferred to Canada.

The Metis, led by Riel, prevented McDougall from entering the territory. ‘You go no further’

Riel then seized Upper Fort Garry (now Winnipeg) from the HBC and began planning negotiations with the Canadian government.

McDougall wrongly declared that the Hudson's Bay Company was no longer in control of the territory; and, due to the tension in the area...

Because of these reasons, the Metis (under Riel) created a provisional government. This didn't sit well with some English settlers in Red River.
What is a Provisional Government?

- Usually, a provisional government is established when a previous government collapses or is no longer able to rule.
- Riel took Macdonald’s hesitation in transferring ownership as a void in leadership and, therefore, took over ruling the Red River Settlement.
- His government included Metis, Aboriginals, and non-Aboriginals.

Why Riel?

- Despite Riel’s young age — just 24 — the Metis saw in him a leader.
- He was educated, understood the Canadian political system and spoke fluent English.
- Most importantly, he identified with the Metis people and their cause.
Assiniboia = Manitoba

- Early in the resistance, Riel negotiated directly with the Canadian government to establish Assiniboia as a province, until...

The Thomas Scott Affair

- Riel’s men had arrested members of a pro-Canadian faction that had resisted the provisional government, including an Orangeman (English Protestant) named Thomas Scott.
- He was anything but a model prisoner, threatening to kill Riel if he had the chance.

Scott was put on trial and executed by firing squad for offences usually considered non-capital (not worthy of the death penalty).
Manitoba Enters

- No longer safe, Riel enlisted his old priest, Father Noel-Joseph Ritchet, to negotiate with Canada on behalf of the provisional government - they soon negotiated an agreement.

- In 1870, the Manitoba Act was passed, allowing the Red River settlement to enter Confederation as the province of Manitoba.

Riel’s Demands

The Act also included some of Riel’s demands, such as separate French schools for Metis children and protection of Catholicism.

Wait a Minute…

Scott is executed and Canada makes Manitoba a province?

What About the Execution?

- After the agreement was settled, Canada sent a military expedition, now known as the Red River Expedition to Manitoba to enforce federal authority.
Red River Expedition
Arriving at
Kakabeka Falls, 1870

Ontario Outrage
As the Red River Expedition headed west, outrage grew in Ontario over Scott’s execution, and many Ontarians demanded that the Expedition be used to arrest Riel and suppress what they considered to be rebellion.

End of the Rebellion
Although Riel fled to the USA before the Expedition reached Upper Fort Garry, the arrival of the Expedition marked the end of the Rebellion.

With Riel gone, the Canadian government ‘banished’ him from Canada for five years in exchange for granting him amnesty.

Return to Red River
- Riel returned to Red River in the summer of 1871, but was forced to leave again when the Ontario government put a $5,000 bounty on him.
Riel Elected to Parliament?
- Riel was elected by acclamation to Parliament in the Manitoba riding of Provencher three times in 1873 and 1874, but never took his seat.
- The bounty was still on his head, and the government in Ottawa announced Riel would not be granted an amnesty in Manitoba without fulfilling one of two conditions.
  - He could be banished to the United States for five years or serve two years in a Canadian prison.
- Riel opted for exile.

Some Interesting Riel Facts
- Although unable to serve in Parliament, Riel did manage to sign the register once, but was thrown out.
- He lived in North Dakota, Montana, and New York.
- During his exile, he became a farmer and also a teacher.
- He also spent some time in mental asylums in Quebec and New York.
What Prompted Another Rebellion?

- The North-West Rebellion or North-West Resistance or the Saskatchewan Rebellion of 1885 was a brief and unsuccessful attempt by the Metis people of the Saskatchewan Territory to bring their concerns about their survival to the Dominion of Canada.

- The main players, again, were Louis Riel and his closest advisor and leader of the Saskatchewan Metis, Gabriel Dumont.

After Red River

- After the Red River Rebellion, many Metis did not want to be part of an English-dominated Canada and moved from Manitoba to Saskatchewan, then part of the Northwest Territories, founding a settlement at Batoche.

- However, as in Manitoba, settlers from Ontario began to arrive, and began arranging land using the square concession system of English Canada, rather than the seigneurial system of strips along a river that the Metis learned from their French-Canadian ancestors.

- In addition to this the buffalo, for generations the Metis' chief source of food, were being hunted to extinction by the Hudsons Bay Company and other, unaffiliated poachers.
Riel Returns
- In 1884 the Metis asked Riel to return from exile in the United States to appeal to the Canadian government on their behalf.
- They had the support of local Cree tribes, led by Big Bear, Crowfoot, and Poundmaker. The Cree tribes joined because their land treaties were not being honored.
- The Cree were also virtually starving due to the buffalo hunt. They believed their treaties obliged the government to feed them; the government disagreed.

Provisional Government: Part II
- In March of 1885, Riel, Gabriel Dumont, and others set up the Provisional Government of Saskatchewan, believing that they could influence the federal government the same way they had in 1869.
- They passed a “Revolutionary Bill of Rights” and took English prisoners around the area of Duck Lake, where a skirmish broke out between the NWMP and Metis / Aboriginals. Both sides suffered losses.

More Violence
- More violence erupted in early April at Frog Lake when a group of Cree under Big Bear’s command took several whites and Metis prisoner. Nine settlers died.
- By now the Canadian army was advancing on the region, more quickly because of the railway.
  - As a group of them made their way to Batoche, the Metis intercepted them at a place called Fish Creek.
- Also, the Northwest Mounted Police were patrolling the area and were prepared for possible uprisings.
Unlike the Red River Resistance, Riel did not have the full support of settlers in Saskatchewan.

This time, Riel lacked support from both the English settlers of the area and many of the non-Métis natives, and due to his belief that God had sent him back to Canada as a prophet— the Catholic Church no longer supported him either.

Aboriginal tribes were also divided, some because of historical tribal animosity.

The battle at Batoche, would be the last in the Northwest Rebellion. It lasted almost four days as the army’s troops sought to take over the provisional government and the Métis fought to defend it.

Louis Riel surrendered on May 15, 1885. He felt that if the Canadians had custody of him they would go easier on the other Métis.
Resistance was Futile

- English Canada, remembering the Thomas Scott affair, wanted the federal government to take tough measures against the Riel.

- By contrast, French Canada pressed the government to show leniency toward the French Catholic Riel.

- In the end, the federal government was determined to dispose of the man who had led two uprisings in the young country’s history.

Riel Imprisoned in Saskatchewan

High Treason

- Riel was formally charged with high treason, a law that had been passed in Great Britain five centuries earlier.

- Riel’s biographer, Maggie Siggins: “With so many headlines in English Canada, screaming for revenge, there was no way the government could consider for Riel anything but the most serious crime on the books.”

- The mandatory sentence was death by hanging.
Riel on Trial

**Insanity Defence**
- Riel’s team of lawyers wanted Riel to plead insanity, but he refused.
- He saw his trial as an opportunity to explain the position of the Metis; he also felt that, if he used the insanity plea, his justification for the rebellion would be dismissed.
- His six man jury was chosen. All were English and only one knew any French.

**The Trial**
- After a trial lasting five days, the jury was sent away to deliberate. One hour later they emerged and declared Riel guilty.
- The jury also recommended mercy for Riel.
- There were two quick appeals, both of which were turned down. The sentence was further delayed when public outcry in Quebec demanded Riel’s mental state be examined.
- Riel still refused.

**John A Macdonald’s Decision**
- Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald’s advisors warned him of grave political consequences for his Conservative party in Quebec should the sentence be carried out.
- “We shall hang though every dog in Quebec bark in his favour,”
Execution & Aftermath

- Riel's trial for high treason was a national spectacle, manipulated by Ottawa. Despite continuing questions about his sanity, Riel was found guilty and hanged.

- His body was transported to Winnipeg, where hundreds of mourners turned out for his funeral and mass at his home church, the St Boniface Cathedral.

Aftermath

- The trial and its aftermath divided the young country along French and English lines.

- Riel's legacy persists today and symbolizes a nation's continuing struggle to reconcile its linguistic, religious and racial differences.

Exonerating Riel

- More than 120 years after a Canadian government hanged Riel for treason, Brian Mulroney's government said Canada had “matured as a nation” and called for the official recognition of Riel's, “unique and historic role as a founder of Manitoba and his contribution in the development of Confederation.” Metis leaders told CBC Radio the move was a step in the right direction.

- In 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin said his government was considering naming Riel a Father of Confederation. As of 2011, it hasn’t happened.
I...yes I have done my duty.
During my life I have aimed at practical results. I hope that after my death my spirit will bring practical results.

All that I have done and risked, and to which I have exposed myself, rested certainly on the conviction that I was called upon to do something for my country.

Riel: Hero in Manitoba
What Do You Think?

Is Louis Riel a Father of Confederation?