

Battle of Seven Oaks: 1816



C.W. Jefferys, The Massacre at Seven Oaks, 19 June 1816
(The Picture Gallery of Canadian History (1945) National Archives of Canada, C-073663)

On June 19, 1816, a group of Native and Metis men working for the North West Company engaged in a brief but bloody battle with a group of non-Native Hudson's Bay men. Twenty-one Hudson's Bay men, including the leader Robert Semple, were killed in what became known as the Battle of Seven Oaks. In one sense, this battle was just one in a series of conflicts between two powerful companies fighting for supremacy in the most important business of the time, the fur trade. In another sense, the Battle of Seven Oaks offers a historical snapshot of conflict in Canada at this time. The Battle also represents an important struggle between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, between the French and English, between the old semi-nomadic life of the fur trade frontier in the Northwest, and the newly emerging life of settled agricultural production on the Prairies.

Overview of the decade: 1815-1824

Economic developments

Technological and political changes in Britain in the early nineteenth century created increased poverty and hardship for families. These conditions contributed to the first large-scale immigration boom from Britain to British North America in the 1815 -1824 decade. Recently arrived British settlers, along with the French Canadian, British, American Loyalists and Aboriginal populations already in the region, lived and worked in an environment that was based in the land. These groups used simple but effective technologies to survive. Europeans first brought and then manufactured iron tools. The technologies of plough and cart helped to clear and plant the land. Farmers supported their families during the winter by logging or working in the fur trade. Animals like mink, raccoons and beaver had fur coats that were among the most luxurious in the world, thanks to the freezing temperatures of the Canadian north. Aboriginal technologies like canoes and snowshoes were as key to the fur trade as they were to human survival in the Northwest. Steel traps and rifles had been quickly adopted by Aboriginal peoples working for the two great fur trading companies— Hudson's Bay Company and North West Company. To the east, the emerging shipbuilding industry helped transport the surpluses of grain, furs, and

timber to overseas ports, and bring back cargoes of immigrants on the return voyage. The technologies used by these populations helped to take advantage of the natural environment, creating the particular economy of British North America: an economy based largely on the land, but increasingly involved with simple industrial production and more complex international trade.



Peter Rindisbacher, Indian Hunters. Pursuing the Buffalo in the Early Spring, 1824 or earlier
(National Archives of Canada, C-114467)

Social developments

Immigration from Britain made a significant difference to British North America, changing the balance from French to English speaking peoples, and from Native to non-Native in much of the country. While 680 people arrived from Britain in 1815, an average of 14,000 people arrived each year between 1816 and 1820, with 23,000 arriving in 1819 alone. Between 1820 and 1825, a further 65,000 people arrived in the colonies. In spite of these large migrations, people carried out most of their lives within a 'traditional' seasonal round of agricultural work and waged labour whose main purpose was to support the family. French Canadian 'habitants' settled along the banks of the St. Lawrence, while British and American settlers took up lands further west, along the shores of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie in Upper Canada, and to the east, in the Maritime Provinces. Newfoundland was settled sparsely by a few fishing families along the coast. While the Aboriginal people of Newfoundland, the Beothuk, had become extinct by the 1820s, a variety of Native populations with very different cultures, survived throughout British North America, and continued to dominate the Great Northwest. Between 1815 and 1824, the Metis—a mixed race society of Native peoples and primarily French Canadian fur traders—developed settlements at the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. Native peoples, who had been trading with Europeans on the prairies for a hundred and fifty years, continued to provide furs for European and Metis traders, their culture and livelihood affected, but not transformed, by the presence of Europeans.

These different ethnic groups often lived near or worked with each other, but separate communities of French, English and Aboriginal people characterized British North American society. Within these groups, differences of wealth and status further divided the population. Urban centres like Halifax, St. John, Montreal, Kingston and York (Toronto) had few of the services we expect from city life—adequate housing, clean and sanitary running water, sewage disposal, garbage disposal, poor relief, street lighting. By 1824, these growing towns began to experience the problems of urban life, problems that settlers hoped they had been left behind in Britain: poverty, overcrowding, disease and crime. Far from the help of extended families and friends, immigrants without financial, medical or social support found themselves in a very vulnerable situation. An economic downturn in Lower Canada in 1815 was accompanied by the first failure of the wheat crop, worsening conditions for French Canadians in both the countryside and the cities. The poorhouse, the hospital and the school seemed to offer a solution to these problems. In spite of thousands of new immigrants in these years, most English, French and Aboriginal people resided in a rural setting. Hard physical labour defined life, and the family was the social and economic focus.

Political developments

Although the colonies were more democratic in their governance than Britain during these years, colonists began to complain of unfair political representation. In Upper Canada, a small group of wealthy landowners controlled both government and land development, and were accused of limiting the growth of the colony. Businessmen and professionals (like doctors and lawyers) lobbied for more political power. In Lower Canada, rural areas suffered from several agricultural crises, resulting in increasing poverty for the French speaking population. An English minority controlled both the economy and politics, and the dominant Francophone population was poorer and had less political power than the minority English. A growing number of Francophone professionals, like the English counterparts in Upper Canada, began to lobby for more political rights and economic power. The North West fell under no political system, and the tiny European and Metis populations were governed by the rough justice administered by the fur trade companies. The majority of Aboriginal peoples continued to live in the northwest, governed by their own laws and customs. Women (particularly after marriage) and most non-British peoples such as African Americans, or Asians had few legal or political rights. Between 1815 and 1824, tensions between Natives, non-Natives, French, English and the privileged and the not-so-privileged began to build.

1816: The Battle of Seven Oaks

Prelude to the battle

By the early nineteenth century, the Hudson's Bay Company was re-organizing. Heavy trapping in the Hudson's Bay area had reduced the beaver population, and so the Company was expanding its trade into North West Company territory, as far west as the Pacific Ocean, and south to the Red River area occupied by Metis and their trading partner, the North West Company. At the same time, one of the Company owners, Thomas Douglas, Fourth Earl of Selkirk, was hatching a plan of his own that would greatly affect the Red River settlement. Lord Selkirk was troubled by the poverty of the people living on his Scottish lands and, like many, he believed that emigration to the colonies would solve the problem. One of the three groups he tried to settle in British North America took up land on the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers. In addition to having land suitable for farming, the Selkirk settlement was in the centre of provisioning routes [routes to supply food for the men transporting and trading furs] between traders and Metis of the North West Company. Lord Selkirk hoped to provide a new home for his Scottish tenants and also for retired officials and traders of Hudson's Bay Company. The Hudson's Bay Company, which had been granted title to the land by Britain in 1670, in turn granted Selkirk 116,000 square miles (five times the size of Scotland) of land and free transportation for the colonists. In return, Selkirk was to provide the Hudson's Bay Company with two hundred 'servants' a year from the settlers.

The colonists arrived at their proposed settlement of Selkirk in 1812, but their arrival was not a happy one. They had travelled by ship to Hudson's Bay and then overland to their new colony, unprepared for the harsh conditions. They suffered badly from the cold, inadequate clothing and transportation, and also hunger. Things were little better after their arrival. Many settlers died in the first two winters due to poor food supplies and shelter inadequate to the prairie conditions. This was despite the help of the Metis who supplied the newcomers with buffalo robes and pemmican (a foul tasting but highly nutritious food, made of buffalo fat, meat and berries that was part of the basic diet of fur traders).

To make things worse, the governor of the new Selkirk colony, Miles McDonnell, decided to solve their problems with food by angering the only group who had helped them. In 1814, the governor passed the Pemmican Proclamation, which declared that no pemmican could be taken out of the colony to provide food for North West Company traders. He later forbade the running of buffalo (a method used to hunt buffalo by running the herd over a cliff). The governor banned this practice which provided food, clothing and income to Aboriginal and Metis people, including those who worked for the North West Company, because it disrupted the agricultural activities of the European settlers. While these proclamations might have served the settlers' immediate need for more food they opened deep conflicts between the settlers and the North West Company. For the Metis families whose livelihoods depended on the fur trade and the buffalo, it was disastrous. The North West Company quickly understood Governor Miles Macdonnell's proclamations as attempts to destroy the North West Company fur trade and Metis society. They fought back by threatening colonists, burning crops and houses, and stealing livestock and agricultural tools. By 1815, the hardships endured in the two winters by the climate, the land and the North West Company encouraged most of settlers to take up North West Company's offer to relocate to the east. But some colonists returned after a good harvest in 1815. French Canadians in Lower Canada, many of whom were involved in the fur trade on a part time basis, supported the activities of the North West Company, the Metis and their Aboriginal allies.



Peter Rindisbacher, Settlers at Red River, early 1820s showing a Swiss immigrant, a German, a Scots Highlander, and a French Canadian
(National Archives of Canada, C-1937; ID #10275)
<http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/10275.htm>

The battle

On June 19, 1816, Cuthbert Grant, a North West Company employee and Red River resident, planned to continue his campaign to drive the remaining Selkirk settlers and the Hudson's Bay Company men out of the Red River area. Earlier in the year, the North West Company had captured Hudson's Bay Company pemmican boats, stolen the pemmican and taken over the fort. They were hoping to starve the Selkirk settlers out by blocking their supply of pemmican and other goods. As Grant and his men were taking the confiscated pemmican to their own fort, the Hudson's Bay Company governor of Selkirk, Robert Semple, rode out to stop what he thought was a small group of North West Company men. He was mistaken. A debate still rages about who fired that first shot, the North West Company's large contingent of men, or the Hudson's Bay Company small party under Semple. But there is little doubt about what followed: a brief but bloody battle raged in which 21 of Semple's men, including Semple himself, were killed by the much larger group of Grant's men. Only one of the North West Company men under Cuthbert Grant died. The battle only lasted 15 minutes, but its effects have lasted almost two centuries.

The aftermath

As a direct result of this battle, the colonists left the colony, putting an end to the first British agricultural settlement on the prairies. Selkirk responded by capturing other North West Company forts and arresting men for what he called a 'massacre' of his men. Over time, the colonists saw this terrible loss of life as an accident, allowing their peaceful co-existence with the Metis in the years to come. For the Metis and the British, however, the Battle of Seven Oaks had more serious and long ranging consequences: this battle made very clear that the French-speaking Metis and English settlers had a distinct—and contradictory—identity.

In some ways, the long-term and indirect results of the battle were more significant than the short-term ones. As far as the Hudson's Bay Company men were concerned, the Seven Oaks "massacre" confirmed that Metis identity (like that of Aboriginal peoples and, they hinted, the French Canadians) was savage and uncivilized. Stories of the 'massacre' told by the British emphasized the trickery used in the attack, and the fact that dead bodies were robbed and mistreated. It was only natural evolution, the British began to argue, that the type of civilization shown by the Selkirk settlers—settled farmers of British origin—must win out over the semi-nomadic savagery of Metis and Aboriginal life. As people in both Upper and Lower Canada began, over the next three decades, to look westward for richer lands to support their growing populations,

the Battle of Seven Oaks became part of the discussion about who should live in the Northwest, and what kind of society should exist.

As far as the Metis were concerned, the Battle of Seven Oaks confirmed their suspicions that British settlement, hostile to both Native and French Canadian Catholic culture, would interfere with their traditional economy and society. Their economy was based on trapping, provisioning fur traders, hunting buffalo and well as farming. Unlike the British settlers, the Metis did not participate in agriculture as a full-time occupation. The buffalo, not agriculture, provided most of their livelihood, from clothing to food. And buffalo in these years took up most of the space that settlers would, in the years to come, want to devote to farming, just as the farms would interfere with the grazing areas of the buffalo. The huge herds needed the natural prairie grasses to survive, and destroyed the flora and fauna as they travelled. The Metis and Aboriginal populations were semi-nomadic because they had to follow the buffalo to fertile grasslands. As the settlers in Alberta would discover decades later, farming was just not compatible with the unfenced grazing of large animals. The competition between the settlers and the Metis was not just a dispute about civilization versus savagery, but a competition between two political economies. The Battle of Seven Oaks made all of these differences clear for the first time: that the Metis were a coherent group with particular goals, values and economy, and these were in conflict with agricultural settlement. If Seven Oaks was the first battle in their fight to preserve the Metis way of life, the last was fought seventy years later under Louis Riel.