

## North West Rebellion: 1885



C.W. Jeffreys, *Batoche*,  
(National Archives of Canada, C-73636)

By the early 1880s, many of the Metis and other Aboriginal peoples living in the Northwest were dissatisfied with the rights they had been granted by the Canadian government regarding land, religion and the language of instruction in public schools. In March 1885, Louis Riel declared himself the leader of a new government for his people, the Metis. When the Canadian government refused to negotiate, violence broke out, and thousands of Canadian militia were brought out to confront the rebels. As a result of the violent confrontations that included murder and kidnapping, most Canadians were convinced that an English, Protestant and non-Native society would better serve the needs of the new west. With the crushing of the North West Rebellion, Native and Metis populations saw an end of their traditional way of life, and thousands of French Canadians in Quebec saw the rejection of minority language and religious rights outside of their province.

### ***Overview of the decade: 1885-1894***

#### **Economic developments**

The decade from 1885 to 1894 was marked by increasing urbanization and industrialization of Canadian society. In these years, many skilled and unskilled workers alike struggled to earn a living family wage—an amount of money that could provide adequate shelter and food for a family. Workers combined together increasingly in trade unions, using work stoppages to pressure employers into providing better wages, limiting the working days to nine hours, and enforcing safer working conditions. During these years, many traditional crafts were transformed as new technologies replaced human skill and strength with factory steam-powered production techniques. While these changes meant increased profits for factory owners, they were often devastating for workers. While some workers, like carpenters, found their skilled trade broken into different operations performed by badly paid and unskilled workers, new forms of skilled labour also emerged, increasing wages for others. Iron puddlers, for example, worked the furnaces making wrought iron.

As industrialization progressed, women worked in factories, or would do parts of factory production at home. Sewing and other textile work was often distributed by factories to low-paid home workers. Urban children were sent out to work in factories and workshops, earning money that was often the difference between starvation and survival during the

recurring economic recessions. With few regulations governing the hours or conditions of work, hundreds of factory children, as well as their mothers and fathers, were killed at work every year. Mining and forestry, two areas that employed thousands of rural workers in the west, were particularly hazardous.

The increase in industrial work had real advantages, however. The standard of living was gradually rising in Canada. As factories grew, the economy expanded and a new middle class began to emerge as a dominant force in late 19th century society. The Canadian Pacific Railway reached the west coast, and the foundation for a national economy promised to bring wealth and development across the country. Job opportunities for women as well as men increased, not only in factories but in new professions like teaching, nursing and office work.

### Social developments

Living conditions in cities like Montreal and Winnipeg worsened for many, as overcrowding and poverty forced more than a quarter of urban families into substandard housing without running water, toilets or adequate heat, light or fresh air. The concern with profits and growth prevented western cities like Winnipeg and Vancouver from putting tax money into improvements like sewers, street lighting and building codes. By the end of the century, however, following the example of cities like Toronto and Kingston, most areas of these cities were beginning to provide these services. Although poverty remained a serious problem, particularly in Montreal, Winnipeg and Vancouver, reformers were lobbying strongly in this decade to reduce crime, violence and disorder through the improvement of urban living conditions.

Women and men alike were becoming involved in social reform movements like the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. The Women's Suffrage Movement worked to incorporate women into economic, political and cultural life. These organizations sought to help the poor, transforming them into useful and productive citizens who would, in turn, improve the social and moral environments in which they lived.

### Political developments

During this decade, although there was increased attention to the poor and unfortunate, various legislative changes took away the rights and privileges of minority groups. An amendment to the 1876 Indian Act made participation in some Aboriginal religious and cultural practices illegal, and both the prairie Sun Dance and the west coast Potlatch ceremonies were banned between 1885 and 1894. Although Aboriginal people had long worked in the same occupations as other rural residents—factories, saw mills, farming, canning and fishing—a Pass System placed severe limits on Aboriginal economic activity. Under this system it was illegal for Aboriginal peoples to leave the reserve without explicit written permission from a government agent. The Canadian government, pressured by British Columbia, instituted its first 'head tax' on Chinese immigrants in the attempt to block their immigration to Canada.

Chinese and Aboriginal men had lost the right to vote in the early 1870s in British Columbia, and the Japanese lost it in 1895. On the Prairies, the Rebellion of 1885 marked the dominance of Anglo-Protestant culture and economics. In 1890,



Chinese work crew on the Canadian Pacific Railroad, circa 1884  
(British Columbia Archives, Call # D-07548; Catalogue # HP072553; Accession # 193501-001)

[http://www.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/cgi-bin/text2html/.visual/img\\_txt/dir\\_123/d\\_07548.txt?D-07548](http://www.bcarchives.gov.bc.ca/cgi-bin/text2html/.visual/img_txt/dir_123/d_07548.txt?D-07548)

the Manitoba Schools Act removed public funding for Francophone and Catholic education, followed in 1892 by the North-West territories (parts of present day Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta). In these years, Canada was asserting its identity as an Anglo-Protestant country, and most privileges that society had to offer were reserved for elite members of that ethnic group. With the massive immigration of eastern Europeans to the prairies after 1896, however, the face of Canada was about to change.

## ***1885: The North West Rebellion***

### **The background**

The 1870s had brought dramatic economic and political changes to the Canadian Prairies. Food shortages, particularly of that staple the buffalo, brought hardship and starvation to Aboriginal and Metis communities. Treaties had given Aboriginal peoples reserves of land and guarantees of food. The *Indian Act* of 1876 had provided Indians special status, but it was based on restrictive economic and cultural policies. The explicit goals of the *Indian Act* were to “civilize” Aboriginal peoples through education in residential schools and training in the civilized science of farming. By the mid-1880s, the Aboriginal peoples of the west were trying to work together under the leadership of Cree Chief Big Bear (Mistahimaskwa), who tried to unite the Blackfoot and Cree to renegotiate the terms of their treaties. They turned for assistance to the Metis, who were having problems of their own with the federal government.

The Metis had been recognized in the *Manitoba Act* of 1870, but their rights to their own education and lands were disappearing. European settlers in the west were also frustrated with difficulties in obtaining good land and transportation, and they too wanted to work with the Metis in lobbying Ottawa for help with these problems. The Metis, other Aboriginal groups and white settlers all had reason for unrest in the fall of 1884.

### **Events of the North West Rebellion**

In June 1884, the Chief Factor at Fort Carlton warned of an increasingly dangerous situation. The decline of the buffalo had already increased poverty among the Metis. The hardship was worsened by the decrease in work transporting furs. Not only was the fur trade declining as Europeans now preferred silk hats to beaver, but the reduced amount of furs were being transported by steamboat and the railway not by Metis canoe. By the middle of June, Chief Poundmaker (Pitikwahanapiwiyin) gathered about two thousand Cree at Fort Carlton to protest the treatment of his people by the government. Violence between the North West Mounted Police and the Cree was narrowly prevented by the diplomacy of Poundmaker and Big Bear but the tense situation continued.

Louis Riel, the champion of an earlier rebellion in 1869, had been brought back from the United States and was living in Batoche, ready to fight Ottawa for Metis and Aboriginal rights. Riel had been living in hiding since the rebellion of 1869,



Riel and His Council, c. 1884  
(National Archives of Canada, PA-12854)

and had been in and out of mental asylums during his years of absence. His mental instability was demonstrated by his frequent visions, and by his overwhelming sense of personal mission to save the peoples of western Canada from Protestant domination. It is not clear how many of his followers shared his belief that the Metis were God's Chosen People who should help in the reform of a corrupt Catholic Church. Many saw Riel as a leader whose religious commitment might protect them from the economic and cultural changes brought on by European settlement. In negotiations with Prime Minister Macdonald, Riel reduced his list of demands to three issues: Metis land title, home rule (democratic say over their own people and lands), and payment for mishandling of the Manitoba Act.

Fearing that the situation would escalate in the region, the North West Mounted Police sent more soldiers to Fort Carlton. In response, Riel and Gabriel Dumont seized guns and ammunition from a Batoche store, and took several hostages to bargain with. The next day, March 19, 1885 they declared the formation of the Second Metis Provisional Government (a provisional government is temporary and self-appointed), with Riel as God's Prophet. When Riel demanded surrender of the North West Mounted Police at nearby Fort Carlton, Superintendent Crozier panicked, sending one hundred armed men to Duck Lake to obtain further supplies before launching an attack on Riel's forces. Unfortunately, Riel's men surrounded them there, killing twelve and injuring a further eleven of Crozier's men in the infamous shootout at Duck Lake. The remaining members of the force abandoned their fort, and quickly requested aid from white settlers throughout the Northwest to help with the uprising. Riel and his men asked for arms and men from Metis and Aboriginal communities in the area.

On March 23, Macdonald sent Canadian troops from Halifax to Winnipeg. Within two weeks, the Canadian Pacific Railway had brought 800 soldiers to Qu'Appelle, and from there they marched north into Saskatchewan country. A second



The fight at Duck Lake, Saskatchewan  
(National Archives of Canada, C-33058; ID #21805)

<http://www.canadianheritage.org/images/large/21805.html>

group of 550 soldiers marched from Swift Current, and a third left Calgary, and the first "truly national" Canadian army was in motion. Within two months, more than 8,000 soldiers were prepared for war against the natives of the north west.

On April 2, the Cree Indians led by Poundmaker, hearing of Duck Lake violence, took over Hudson's Bay Store at Fish Creek store and killed nine white men. Two women were taken hostage but released unharmed some weeks later. In April and May, 3,000 troops arrived and besieged Riel at Batoche, and fifty people were killed during these months. On May 12, 1885, the Metis were finally conquered, and Riel surrendered three days later. Poundmaker was imprisoned, but died shortly after an early release was granted him on the grounds of his ill health. Riel was arrested, tried and found guilty of treason. He was hanged on November 18, 1885.

### Impact of the Rebellion

In an important sense, the failure of the Manitoba Act created the North West Rebellion. The Manitoba Act failed to

reconcile the different groups—French and English, Aboriginal and European, hunters and farmers, Protestants and Catholics—who were trying to live together in the region. The Manitoba Act had promised the Metis the choice of being educated in either French or English. Acreage for every Metis and their families was guaranteed. In 1870, when the Manitoba Act was formulated, English and French populations in the Red River district were about equal, while Native peoples far outnumbered Metis and European. By 1891, however, only 11,000 of the 152,000 residents of the Northwest were Francophone, and most of those were Metis. Relatively few Francophones moved from Quebec to the North West. Despite land shortages and unemployment in Quebec, Quebecois avoided the west during these years, preferring to stay in their own Francophone province. Between 1870 and 1885, Metis' rights to their language and culture were disappearing along with their economic foundation.

Other changes were also taking their toll. By the 1870s, many saw European settlement of the west as the foundation of Canada's transformation into one of the great empires of the world. Western 'boosters' hoped to recreate the American experience, where an expanding frontier and extensive immigration would raise Canada to the status of a great power. Although the dreams of these promoters met with little real success before 1896, their impact can be measured in a popular lack of sympathy—outside of Quebec—for Riel's cause.

The North West Rebellion was a disaster from most points of view. It absorbed over \$5,000,000 at a time when money was desperately needed for basic services like roads, drains and schools. The Rebellion destroyed the Aboriginal peoples' campaign to renegotiate treaties, because sympathy for their cause ended with Riel's failure. The Rebellion provided a serious handicap to the Metis of Saskatchewan in the following decades. The bloodshed was blamed on Aboriginal savagery, while Riel's extreme Catholic beliefs seemed to support British beliefs in superiority of white Protestants. Both seemed to demonstrate non-Native's suitability for settling the west, paving the way for the massive settlement by European immigrants that was to follow in the 1896-1912 period.

At the same time that the North West Rebellion seemed to confirm that Natives and Metis could not participate in the western "march of progress," it created a new idea of a united Canada that was extremely popular among those east of the Manitoba border. The new Canada emerging after the Rebellion was English and Protestant, and it was held together by the railroad and by military strength in central Canada. When Riel was hanged in 1885, it was not only the Metis and Aboriginal peoples who felt defeated. Thousands of Quebecois took to the streets, believing that the Canadian government had declared itself firmly against French Canadian rights outside of Quebec.