Louis David Riel (21 March 1844 – 16 November 1885) was a Canadian politician, a founder of the province of Manitoba, and a political leader of the Métis people of the Canadian Prairies. He led two rebellions against the government of Canada and its first post-Confederation prime minister, John A. Macdonald. Riel sought to preserve Métis rights and culture and built his followers' homeland in the West came progressively under the Canadian sphere of influence. Over the decades, he has been made a folk hero by Francophones and other patriotic nationalists, native rights activists, and the New Left student movement. Arguably, Riel has received more scholarly attention than any other figure in Canadian history.

The first resistance led by Riel became known as the Red River Rebellion of 1869-1870. The provincial government established by Riel ultimately negotiated the terms under which the modern province of Manitoba entered the Canadian Confederation. Riel ordered the execution of Thomas Scott; and fled to the United States to escape prosecution. Despite this, he is frequently referred to as the “Father of Manitoba.” While a fugitive, he was elected three times to the House of Commons of Canada, although he never assumed his seat. During these years, he was frustrated by having to remain in exile despite his growing belief that he was a divinely chosen leader and prophet, a belief which would later surface and influence his actions. Because of this new religious conviction, Catholic leaders who had supported him before increasingly repudiated him. He married in 1881 while in exile in Mérida, in the United States, he fathered three children.

In 1884 Riel was called upon by the Métis leaders in Saskatchewan to articulate their grievances to the Canadian government. Instead he organized a military resistance that resulted in the Red River Rebellion. Riel’s efforts were largely fruitless, Smith chose to present his case in a public forum. Smith assured large audiences of the Government’s goodwill in meetings on 19 and 20 January, leading Riel to propose the formation of a Committee to send representatives to Ottawa to engage in direct negotiations on that basis. Nevertheless, the non-bilingual McDougall was appointed the Committee chairman, the majority population of the Red River had historically been Métis and First Nations people. Upon his return, Riel found that religious, nationalistic, and racial tensions were exacerbated by an influx of Protestant settlers from Ontario. The political situation was also uncertain, as ongoing negotiations for the transfer of Rupert’s Land from the Hudson’s Bay Company to Canada had not been addressed the political terms of transfer. Finally, despite warnings from the Canadian government to avert the situation, the government of Canada did take notice, swore revenge, and set up a "General Order in Council", before returning to the Red River settlement on 26 July 1868.

Rebel Riel arrived at the Upper Fort Garry on 20 August 1869. Riel was appointed as a delegate to the Canadian government to negotiate terms for the Métis. The Métis did not possess title to their land, which was in any case laid out according to the "patriotic system" rather than in English-style square lots.

Riel returns to Canada as a leader
In 1873, Riel led a group of Métis to the United States to negotiate with the Canadian government. While in the United States, he was elected to the New York State Assembly and the New York State Senate. In 1874, he was arrested in New York City and extradited to Canada. He was tried in Regina, Saskatchewan, on charges of treason and conspiracy, and was convicted. Riel was sentenced to hang, and his execution had a lasting negative impact on Canada, polarizing the new nation along ethno-religious lines. Although only a few hundred people were directly affected by the Rebellion in Saskatchewan, the long-term result was that the Prairie provinces would be controlled by the Anglophones, not the Francophones. Riel’s execution was a defining moment in Canadian history, symbolizing the end of the Métis struggle for independence and the beginning of the era of assimilation.

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The North-West Rebellion

Break with the church

Grievances in the Saskatchewan territory

Exile and mental illness

The execution of Louis Riel Scott

Amnesty question

Intervening years

Exile and mental illness

Montana and family life

The North-West Rebellion

Grievances in the Saskatchewan territory

Return of Riel

Break with the church

Historian Donald Creighton has argued that Riel had become a changed man:

In the 15 years since he had left Red River, his megalomania had grown greater than ever. His unanswerable grievances, declensions of grandeur, messianic claims, and dictatorial impulses had all become more extreme; but these violent excesses were not the only symptoms of his curious mental and moral decline. He had lost his shrewd appreciation of realities. His sense of direction was confused in his purposes was equivocal. He showed, at intervals, a cynical selfishness and the ruthless pedantry... although in public he professed that his sole aim was the increase of the Métis and the plains Indians. The rapid collapse of the buffalo herd was causing near starvation among the Plains Cree, especially along the south branch of the river in the country surrounding the Saint-Laurent mission (near Prince Albert). In 1883, the Hudson's Bay Company had become the sole owner of the buffalo trade. In 1881, he married Marguerite Monet à Barnabé in the district of Longue Pointe, Quebec, although he had again fled, a warrant having been issued for his arrest in September. Lépine was not so lucky; he was captured and faced trial.
Revoking Riel's conviction

On 18 March it became known that the North West Mounted Police garnison at Battleford was being reinforced. Although only 100 men had been sent in response to warnings from father Louis Riel and NWMP Superintendent J. N. B. Creighton, a rumour spread that 500 heavily armed troops were advancing on the territory. Métis patience was exhausted, and Riel's followers seized arms, took hostages, and cut the telegraph lines between Battleford and Batoche. The Provincial Government of Saskatchewan, declared at Batoche on 19 March, with Riel as the political and spiritual leader and with Dumont assuming responsibility for military affairs.

Riel had counted on the Canadian government being unable to effectively respond to another uprising in the distant North West Territories, thereby forcing them to accept political negotiation. This was essentially the same strategy that had worked to such great effect during the 1870 rebellion. In that instance, the first troops did not arrive until three months after Riel seized control. However, Riel had completely overlooked the significance of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Despite some uncompleted gaps, the first Canadian regular and militia units, under the command of Major-General Frederick Dobson Middleton, arrived in Duck Lake less than two weeks after Riel had made his demands.

Knowing that he could not defeat the Canadians in direct confrontation, Dumont had hoped to force the Canadians to negotiate by engaging in a long-drawn out campaign of guerilla warfare. Dumont realised a modest success along these lines at the Battle of Fish Creek on 24 April 1885. Riel, however, insisted on concentrating forces at Batoche to defend his “city of God”. The outcome of the ensuing Battle of Batoche, which took place from 9 to 12 May was never in doubt, and on 15 May a disheartened Riel surrendered to Canadian forces. Although, Big Bear’s forces managed to hold out until the Battle of Loon Lake on 3 June, the rebellion was a dismal failure for Métis and Natives alike, as they surrendered or fled.

Trial for treason

Several individuals closely tied to the government requested that the trial be moved to Regina because of concerns with the possibility of an ethnically mixed jury. Some historians contend that the trial was moved to Regina because of concerns with the possibility of an ethnically mixed jury. Knowing that he could not defeat the Canadians in direct confrontation, Dumont had hoped to force the Canadians to negotiate by engaging in a long-drawn out campaign of guerilla warfare. Dumont realised a modest success along these lines at the Battle of Fish Creek on 24 April 1885. Riel, however, insisted on concentrating forces at Batoche to defend his “city of God”. The outcome of the ensuing Battle of Batoche, which took place from 9 to 12 May was never in doubt, and on 15 May a disheartened Riel surrendered to Canadian forces. Although, Big Bear’s forces managed to hold out until the Battle of Loon Lake on 3 June, the rebellion was a dismal failure for Métis and Natives alike, as they surrendered or fled.

Execution

Boulton writes in his memoirs that, as the date of his execution approached, Riel regretted his opposition to the defence of insanity and vainly attempted to provide evidence that he was not sane. Requests for a retrial and an appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in Britain were denied. Sir John A. Macdonald, who was instrumental in upholding Riel’s sentence, is famously quoted as saying:

“Life, without the dignity of an intelligent being, is not worth having.”

The jury found him guilty but recommended mercy; nonetheless, Judge Hugh Richardson, one juror later said, “And he was hanged for the murder of Scott.”

Before his execution, Riel was reconciled with the Catholic Church, and assigned Father André as his spiritual advisor. He was also given writing materials so that he could employ this time in prison to write a book. Louis Riel was hanged for treason on 16 November 1885 at the North West Mounted Police barracks in Regina.

Boulton writes of Riel’s final moments:

...Père André, after explaining to Riel that the end was at hand, asked him if he was at peace with men. Riel answered “Yes.” The next question was, “Do you forgive all your enemies?” “Yes.” Riel then asked him if he might speak. Father André advised him not to do so. He then received the kiss of peace from both the priests, and Father André exclaimed in French, “ meaning “so, heaven.

The cap was pulled down, and while he was praying the trap was pulled. Death was not instantaneous. Louis Riel’s pulse ceased four minutes after the trap-door fell, and during that time the rope around his neck slowly strangled and choked him to death. The body was to have been interred inside the gallows’ enclosure, and the grave was commenced, but an order came from the Lieutenant-Governor to hand the body over to Sheriff Chapleau which was accordingly done that night.

Following the execution, Riel’s body was returned to his mother’s home in St Vital, where it lay in state. On 12 December 1886, his remains were laid in the churchyard of the St Boniface Cathedral. Riel’s tombstone at the St Boniface Cathedral in Winnipeg.

The trial of execution of Riel caused a bitter and prolonged reaction which culminated Canadian politics for decades. The execution was both supported and opposed by the provinces. For example, Ontario (conservative) strongly supported Riel’s execution, but Quebec was vehemently opposed to it. Francophones were upset Riel was hanged because they thought his execution was a symbol of English dominance. The Orange Irish Protestant element in Ontario had demanded the execution as the punishment for Riel’s treason and his execution of Thomas Scott in 1870. With their revenge satisfied, the Orange turned their attention to other matters (especially the Orange Irish Protestant element in Ontario had demanded the execution as the punishment for Riel’s treason and his execution of Thomas Scott in 1870. With their revenge satisfied, the Orange turned their attention to other.

Legacy

The Saskatchewan Métis’ requested land grants were all provided by the government by the end of 1887, and the government resurveyed the Métis river lots in accordance with their wishes. The Métis achievement, depriving him of his proper role as the father of Manitoba.”

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Historiography

Historians have debated the Riel case so often and so passionately that he is the most written-about person in all of Canadian history. Interpreters have varied dramatically over time. The first amateur English language historians hailed the triumph of civilization, represented by English-speaking Protestants, over savagery represented by the half-breed Métis who were Catholic and spoke French. Riel was portrayed as an insane traitor and an obstacle to the expansion of Canada to the West. By the mid-20th century academic historians had dropped the theme of savagery versus civilization, decentered the Métis, and focused on Riel, presenting his execution as a major cause of the bitter division in Canada along ethnocultural and geographical lines of religion and language. W. L. Morton says of the execution:

[It] gave rise to a bitter and prolonged reaction which convulsed the course of national politics for the next decade. In Ontario it had been demanded and applauded by the Orange Order as a temple of treason and a vindication of loyalty. In Quebec Riel was defended, despite his apastasy and megalomania, as the symbol, indeed as a hero of his race.

Morton argued that Riel's demands were unrealistic:

[They] did touch on some real grievances, such as the need for increased representation of the people in the Council of the Territories, but they did not present a program of practical substance which the government might have granted without betrayal of its responsibilities. ... the Canadian government can hardly be blamed for refusing to continue its private negotiations with him, or for sending in the troops to suppress rebellion.

The Catholic bishops had originally supported the Métis, but reversed themselves when they realized that Riel was leading a heretical movement. They made sure that he was not honored as a martyr. However the bishops lost their influence during the Quiet Revolution, and activists in Quebec found in Riel the perfect hero, with the image now of a freedom fighter who stood up for his people against an oppressive government in the face of widespread racist bigotry. His insanity was ignored and he was made a folk hero by the Francophones, the Catholic nationalists, the native rights movement, and the New Left student movement. Activists who espoused violence embraced his image; in the 1960s, the Quebec terrorist group, the Front de Libération du Québec, adopted the name "Louis Riel" for one of its terrorist cells.

Across Canada there emerged a new interpretation of reality in his rebellion, holding that the Métis had major unresolved grievances; that the government was indeed unresponsive; that Riel resorted to violence only as a last resort; and he was given a questionable trial, then executed by a vengeful government. John Foster said in 1985 that:

the interpretive drift of the last half-century... has witnessed increasingly shrill though frequently uncritical condemnations of Canadian government culpability and equally uncritical identification with the "victimization" of the "innocent" Métis.

However, a leading specialist Thomas Flanagan reversed his views after editing Riel's writings:

As I sifted the evidence this became less and less convincing to me until I concluded that the opposite was closer to the truth: that the Métis grievances were at least partly of their own making, that the government was on the verge of resolving them when the Rebellion broke out, that Riel's resort to arms could not be explained by the failure of constitutional agitation and that he received a surprisingly fair trial.

As for the insanity, historians have noted that many religious leaders the past have exhibited behavior that looks exactly like insanity. Flanagan emphasizes that Riel exemplified the tradition of religious mystics involved in politics, especially those with a sense that the world was about to be totally transformed by their religious vision. In his case it meant his delivering the Métis from colonial domination. More broadly, Flanagan argues that Riel was devoutly religious and rejected equalitarianism (which he equated with secularism), concluding he was "a millenarian theocrat, sympathetic to the 'ancien régime' and opposed to the French Revolution, democracy, individualism, and secular society."

Métis scholars have noted that Riel is a more important figure to non-Métis than to Métis; he is the only Métis figure most non-Métis are aware of. Political scientists such as Thomas Flanagan have pointed out certain parallels between Riel's following during the West Rebellion and millenarian cults.

Commemorations

A resolution was passed by Parliament on 10 March 1992 citing that Louis Riel was the founder of Manitoba. Two statues of Riel are located in Winnipeg. One of the Winnipeg statues, the work of architect E. P. Charbonneau and sculptor Mariien Lemay, depicts Riel as a naked and tormented figure. It was unveiled in 1970 and stood in the grounds of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba for 23 years. After much outcry (especially from the Métis community) that the statue was an undignified misrepresentation, the statue was removed and placed at the Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface.

It was replaced in 1994 with a statue designed by Miguel Joyal depicting Riel as a dignified statesman. The unveiling ceremony was on 16 May 1994, in Winnipeg.

A statue of Riel on the grounds of the Saskatchewan Legislative Building in Regina was installed and later removed for similar reasons.

In numerous communities across Canada, Riel is commemorated in the names of streets, schools, neighborhoods, and other landmarks. Examples include the landmarks Éplandeau Riel eskasonin bridge linking Old Saint-Boniface with Winnipeg, the Louis Riel School Division, Louis Riel Avenue in Old Saint-Boniface, and Riel Avenue in St. Vital Métis neighbourhood (which is sometimes called Riel). The student centre and campus pub at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon are named after Riel (Place Riel and Louis; respectively). 11 Highway 11, stretching from Regina to just south of Prince Albert, has been named Louis Riel Trail by the province; the roadway passes near locations of the 1885 rebellion. One of the student residences at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia is named Louis Riel House. There is a Louis Riel School in Leduc, Alberta, and Ottawa, Ontario. On 26 September 2007, Manitoba legislature passed a bill establishing a statutory holiday on the third Monday in February as Louis Riel Day. That same day some other provinces celebrate Family Day, beginning in 2008. The first Louis Riel Day was celebrated on 18 February 2008. This new statutory holiday coincides with the celebration on 15-24 February of the Festival du Voyageur.

In the spring of 2008, the Government of Saskatchewan, Tourism, Parks, Culture and Sport Minister Christine Tell proclaimed in Duck Lake that the “125th commemoration, in 2010, of the 1885 Northwest Resistance is an excellent opportunity to tell the story of the prairie Métis and First Nations peoples’ struggle with Government forces and how it has shaped Canada today.” One of three Territorial Government buildings remains on Dewdney Avenue in the Saskatchewan capital city of Regina, Saskatchewan which was the site of the Trial of Louis Riel, where the drama the “Trial of Louis Riel” is still performed. Following the May trial, Louis Riel was hanged November 1885. The RCMP Heritage Centre, in Regina, opened in May 2007. The Métis brought his body to his mother’s home, now the Riel House, National Historic Site, and then interred at the St. Boniface Basilica, in Manitoba, his birthplace, for burial.

Arts, literature and popular culture


In the 1940 film North West Mounted Policeman, the role of Louis Riel is portrayed by Maurice MacDonald. An epic about Riel entitled Louis Riel was commissioned for Canada's centennial celebrations in 1967. It was an opera in three acts, written by Harry Somers, with an English and French libretto by Maury Moore and Jacques Langlarg. The Canadian Opera Company produced and performed the first run of the opera in September and October 1967.

From the late 1960s until the early 1990s, the city of Regina was devoutly religious and rejected equalitarianism (which he equated with secularism), concluding he was “a millenarian theocrat, sympathetic to the ‘ancien régime’ and opposed to the French Revolution, democracy, individualism, and secular society.”


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From the late 1960s until the early 1990s, the city of Regina hosted "Louis Riel," a summer celebration that included a relay race that combined running, backpack carrying, canoeing, hill climbing, and horseback riding along the South Saskatchewan River in the city's downtown core. Traditionally, the event also included a cabbage roll eating contest and tug-of-war competition, as well as live musical performances. Although not affiliated with the Saskatchewan Exhibition, for whom Louis Riel Day was scheduled for the day before the start of the fair, and as such to be considered the Exhibition's unofficial kickoff (the scheduling of the two events was separated in later years). The event was discontinued when major sponsors pulled out.

Buffy Childs wrote a song entitled Louis Riel", which was performed by The Headcoats. Texas musician Doug Sahm wrote a song entitled "Louis Riel"; which appeared on the album S.O. in the song, Sahm likens the loring surrounding Riel to David Crockett's legend in his home state, spinning an abridged tale of Riel's life as a revolutionary: "... but you gotta respect him for what he thought was right... And all around Regina they talk about him still - why did they have to kill Louis Riel?"

The Seattle-based indie rock band Strand of Oaks also wrote a song entitled "Louis Riel" that appears on their 2008 self-titled album. A track entitled Showmen Today: A Lament for Louis Riel appears on the 2009 album Live: Two Nights In March by Saskatchewan singer/guitarist Little Miss Higgins; a studio version features on her 2010 release Across The Borderline.
On 22 October 2003, the Canadian news channel CBC Newsworld and its French-language equivalent, Réseau de l'information, staged a simulated retrial of Riel. Viewers were invited to enter a verdict on the trial over the internet, and more than 10,000 votes were received—87% of which were "not guilty". The results of this straw poll led to renewed calls for Riel's posthumous pardon. Also on the basis of a public poll the CBC's greatest Canadian project ranked Riel as the 11th "Greatest Canadian".

An episode of the TV series How the West Was Won from 1979 was named L'Affaire Riel featuring Louis Riel while in exile in the United States. In 2001, Canadian sketch comedy troupe Royal Canadian Air Force featured Riel in its sendup of the CBC documentary series Canada: A People's History. Significant parallels were drawn between Riel's actions and those of modern-day Québécois separatists, and the comedian who portrayed Riel was made up to look like then-Premier Lucien Bouchard.

See also
- Aboriginal Canadian personalities
- History of Manitoba
- List of Canadian First Nations leaders
- Métis National Council
- The Canadian Citizen and Aboriginal peoples

Further reading
- Flanagan, Thomas. "Historiographical introduction" ch 1 of Louis Riel and the Creation of Modern Canada, 1869-1885, University of New Mexico Press, 2008
Popular Products

- Amplifiers
- Acoustic Guitars
- Bass Guitars
- Computers
- Cymbals
- Drums
- Electric Guitars
- Electronic Drums
- Microphones
- MIDI Controllers
- Music Theory Books

Popular Music Brands

Music Scenes
Louis Riel was born there in 1844, near modern Winnipeg, Manitoba, to Louis Riel, Sr. and Julie Lagimodière. Riel was the eldest of eleven children in a locally well-respected family. His father, who was of Franco-Ojibwa Métis descent, had gained prominence in this community by organizing a group that supported Guillaume Sayer, a Métis imprisoned for challenging the HBC’s historical trade monopoly. Louis “David” Riel (October 22, 1844 – November 16, 1885), was a Canadian politician and leader of the M�tis people of the Canadian prairies.

2. Background

2.1 Background

2.2 Riel emerges as a leader

2.3 Provisional government

2.4 Canadian resistance and the execution of Scott

2.5 Creation of Manitoba and the Wolseley expedition

3. The intervening years

3.1 The amnesty question

3.2 Exile and mental illness

3.3 Montana and family life

4. The North-West Rebellion