

# The Treaty Trail: U. S. - Indian Treaty Councils in the Northwest

## Louis Riel Historical Cultural Figure

Louis Riel is one of the Canada's most controversial historical figures. To the Métis and French Canadians, he is a hero. Early Canada and the majority of settlers in the Canadian west in 1885 regarded him a villain; although today he is seen as an early protester of central Canadian political and economic power.

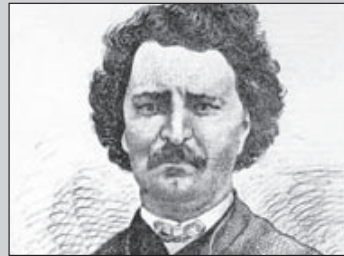
Riel, like most of the 12,000 inhabitants of the Red River area [now Manitoba], was Métis—the offspring of French fur traders and their aboriginal wives. The Métis had a distinctive culture based on hunting buffalo and were concerned about protecting it since they were nomadic and had no paper title to their land. Declining buffalo herds, increasing smallpox epidemics, and the threat of further white settlement raised their fears.

When Rupert's Land was bought from the Hudson's Bay Company and no provision was made for the natives, Riel led a successful rebellion that eventually resulted in the *Manitoba Act*. The region joined Canada as the bilingual, bi-educational, and bicultural province of Manitoba on July 15, 1870. A full amnesty was extended to all rebels except three Métis leaders, including Riel. He was given a five-year term of exile, but was quietly allowed to return after he promised to keep the peace.

However, Métis rights continued to pose a challenge. After Manitoba entered Confederation, many Métis traveled westward into present-day Saskatchewan and Alberta. Although promised their distinctive way of life would be preserved there, buffalo herds were disappearing and no Métis outside of Manitoba had legal title to their land. In 1884, a new threat arose — the transcontinental railway. The Métis turned to the one man they believed could save them.

Riel sent a petition to Prime Minister John A. Macdonald asking for provincial status, an elected government, and control over natural resources. Although Macdonald promised to investigate the requests, no government policies came forward. Riel took action and, in March

1885, he declared a provisional government at Batoche, promising to arm his followers. This threat of violence lost him the support of the Roman Catholic Church and many settlers who favored change by legal and peaceful means. Riel had only the backing of the Métis and some of the aboriginal tribes in the region. Standing against them were the Canadian government, the Mounted Police, and the railway. Battles began in April 1885 but Riel was overwhelmed



and surrendered by May 15.

Riel's trial in Regina created tremendous interest throughout Canada. He refused a plea of insanity (although he had spent several years in asylums convinced that he was a prophet of God), and, after brief deliberation, a jury of six white males found Riel guilty of high treason. Although the jury recommended mercy, the judge in the case could not decide the sentence and passed the decision on to the Prime Minister.

It was reputed Prime Minister Macdonald said, "He shall hang, though every dog in Quebec bark in his favor." On November 16th, the execution was carried out.

The hanging of Riel changed the political landscape of Canada. French Canada erupted in fury and Honoré Mercier, founder of the *Parti National* in Quebec, became premier within two years. Wilfred Laurier, largely supported by the Quebec vote, became the first French-Canadian Prime Minister from 1896 to 1911. It would be over seventy years before a Conservative, the party of Macdonald and Cartier, would win a majority of the federal seats in Quebec.