

HOW DID THE MÉTIS CHALLENGE THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT?

Imagine your government started to make changes to your community that you did not agree with. What actions might you take to challenge the government's policies? As you learned in Chapter 3, Canada's communities in the Northwest were changing in the 1880s. New settlers were continuously moving into Manitoba. How do you think these developments affected the Métis living in the Northwest?

PETITIONING THE GOVERNMENT OVER DELAYED LAND CLAIMS

As part of the 1870 *Manitoba Act*, the federal government promised to set aside land for 7000 descendants of the Red River Métis. By 1884, the Métis were still waiting for the federal government to issue their land grants. Read **Figure 4.1**. What does the excerpt tell you about how some Métis people felt about the delayed land claims?

Frustrated and tired of waiting for the government to respond, many Métis left Manitoba. Many Métis moved to Saskatchewan, which was known as the District of Saskatchewan at the time. They wanted to join pre-existing Métis communities there. Others left for the United States. New immigrants were also arriving in Manitoba at the time. Census records show Manitoba's Métis population dropped from 83 percent in 1870 to just 7 percent in 1886.

LOUIS RIEL'S RETURN TO CANADA

In May 1884, a group of four Métis men, including Gabriel Dumont, a Métis leader from Saskatchewan, travelled to Montana to meet with Louis Riel. They wanted Riel to lead their protest against the federal government. During his exile, Riel had become more religious. He was convinced that this invitation to lead the Métis again was part of God's plan for him.

Riel and his followers petitioned the federal government in December 1884 to settle both Métis and new settler land claims. The federal government responded in February 1885, promising to form a committee to investigate the land claim issue. Many Métis saw this as just another way the government would delay settling the land claims. What does the quote in **Figure 4.2** tell you about Riel's reaction to the federal government's response?

"The Métis have been petitioning [for land] for the last ten years. I suppose the Government have looked upon the matter as mere child's play; despite formal documents and Acts of Parliament as a guarantee, the whole matter has been a farce."

— N.C.W., resident of the District of Saskatchewan

FIGURE 4.1 This is an excerpt from a letter written on May 18, 1884, to Louis Riel from a man identified as N.C.W. He was likely Riel's cousin. **Analyze:** Why does N.C.W. refer to the land claims process as a "farce"?

"The petitions sent to the Government are not listened to ... The Original half-breeds are determined to save their rights or to perish at once."

— Louis Riel, Métis leader

FIGURE 4.2 A quote from Riel in February 1885. During this period, the Métis were often referred to as "half-breeds" since they had mixed First Nations and French or English heritage. **Analyze:** Based on this quote, what options was Riel considering?

"1. Save our souls by trying day and night to live a holy life everywhere and in all respects.

2. Save our country from a wicked Government by taking up arms if necessary."

— *Oath of Revolution*

FIGURE 4.3 In March 1885, Riel and 10 other Métis leaders signed an Oath of Revolution. **Analyze:** What do Riel and his followers promise to do?

militia a group of fighters made up of regular citizens

CREATING A NEW PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT

Riel and Dumont saw how the federal government ignored the Métis, as well as the First Nations and other settlers in the Northwest. The two men were convinced they had to take more drastic action. The group organized an army of about 300 men and signed a secret oath, partly shown in **Figure 4.3**. How do you think the federal government would react to seeing this oath?

On March 19, 1885, Riel created a provisional government like the one he had set up in Manitoba in 1870. Riel, who had begun to refer to himself as a "Prophet of the New World," was appointed president. Dumont was chosen to lead the **militia**. The federal government grew concerned about another possible Métis resistance. On March 22, the federal government alerted government troops to prepare for possible action in the Northwest.

THE NORTHWEST RESISTANCE

Messengers from Riel's government were sent to First Nations communities in Manitoba and Saskatchewan to urge them to join the Métis in a more forceful resistance. Some members of the Plains and Woodland Cree and Assiniboine, who were also frustrated with the government, agreed to join the resistance. However, a number of First Nations leaders still wanted peace with the federal government.

BATTLE OF DUCK LAKE

On March 25, 1885, Dumont and his men raided the local store in Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, for supplies. Duck Lake was located near Batoche. The next day, a group of 100 North-West Mounted Police tried to track down Dumont and his 300 men in order to take back the stolen supplies. To avoid violence, Dumont instructed his men to hide while his brother, Isidore, and Assiwiyin, a Cree Elder, spoke to the police. A fight still broke out and gunshots were fired, signalling the start of the first battle in the resistance. Men on both

sides were killed, including Isidore and Assiwiyin. The North-West Mounted Police were forced to retreat. Examine **Figure 4.4**, a sketch showing the battle at Duck Lake. What could this battle mean for the Métis resistance?

FIGURE 4.4 A lithograph of an illustration called *The Fight at Duck Lake*. The original was drawn from the *Canadian Illustrated News* in 1885. **Analyze:** Look closely at the foreground and background. What story is told by the details in each?



THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT DEPLOYS TROOPS

After the Battle of Duck Lake, the federal government sent troops to the Northwest, led by the newly appointed Major-General Frederick Middleton. At the time of the 1870 Red River Resistance, the government had not been able to send troops quickly since the railway did not extend into what is now Manitoba. By 1885, this had changed. Examine **Figure 4.5**, which shows the government troops at Winnipeg Station in 1885. What does the photo tell you about the government's response to the Northwest Resistance? It took only 11 days for the first troops to arrive in the Northwest. Within a month, there were 3000 government troops ready to fight the Métis. The railway also allowed troops to bring in large supplies of weapons. One of the weapons the troops brought was the Gatling gun. The Gatling gun worked like an early version of the machine gun. You can see it in the bottom left corner of the chapter opener image. It was able to fire 100 rounds of ammunition per minute.

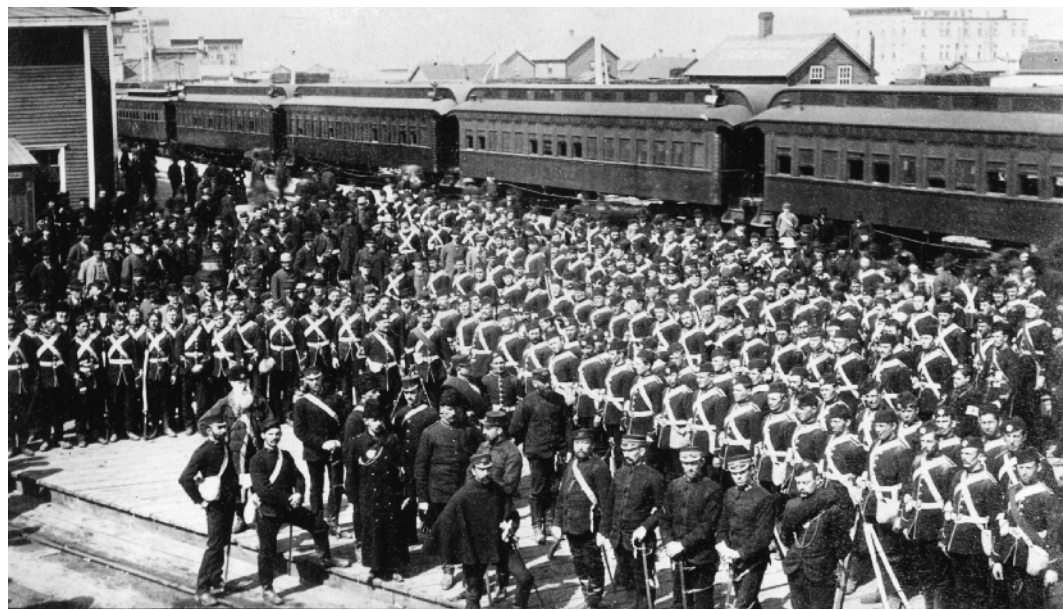


FIGURE 4.5 This photo shows government troops arriving at Winnipeg Station in April 1885. **Analyze:** Based on the details in the photo, what advantages might the troops have had from travelling by train?

BATTLE AT BATOCHE

After Duck Lake, there were several battles throughout April. Toward the end of the month, Middleton and his troops headed toward Riel's headquarters in Batoche. Dumont led his militia to Fish Creek, south of Batoche, where they ambushed Middleton's troops, forcing them to retreat.

The retreat lasted only a few weeks. Middleton and some of his troops headed for Batoche again in early May. The Métis and First Nations militia of fewer than 300 men faced a government force of over 800. Seeing the Métis were outnumbered, Dumont wanted to use surprise attacks in the countryside, taking advantage of his knowledge of the land. Riel refused. He believed that God was on their side and wanted them to fight against their enemy at Batoche. Examine the chapter opener image again, which shows the Battle of Batoche. What do the details tell you about the battle?

The battle began on May 9, 1885, with a three-day standoff. After a series of failed attacks, a group of government troops decided to charge the Métis front line. The Métis militia numbered only 50 to 60 men at this point. They soon ran out of ammunition and had to retreat. On May 15, Riel surrendered. He believed that a public trial might bring attention to the Métis' struggle against the government. Dumont and others escaped to the United States. With the defeat at Batoche and Riel's surrender, the Northwest Resistance was over.

How do you think Dumont may have reacted to Riel's decision?

CONNECTING TO OUR PAST

JESSE LAFONTAINE: MÉTIS YOUTH ROLE MODEL

Jesse Lafontaine (**Figure 4.6**) is an 18-year-old Métis youth who is learning about his Métis history and culture. Lafontaine is passing down his new-found knowledge to future generations of Métis in his home province of British Columbia.

Lafontaine started exploring his Métis culture when he was in middle school. His family had traced their Métis ancestry back 10 generations to the 1690s in Québec. Today, Lafontaine's family lives in Kelowna, British Columbia.

To get a better understanding of his Métis culture, Lafontaine became active in his school's Aboriginal community. Then, he was invited to become a member of the Aboriginal Ambassador Program in the Okanagan region. The students in this program worked to build more knowledge of Métis history and culture. They formed a paddle team (**Figure 4.7**), participated in drumming events, and learned from the Elders.

They also sang traditional songs, made drums, and prepared traditional foods.



FIGURE 4.6 Jesse Lafontaine

In 2014, Lafontaine and other students in the Aboriginal Ambassador Program travelled to Vancouver for the Gathering Our Voices Aboriginal Youth Conference. Lafontaine was invited to make a presentation on Medicine Wheel teachings. The Medicine Wheel is a symbolic circle used by many Aboriginal people. It reminds people to respect the interconnectedness of all things. Lafontaine explained how the Medicine Wheel's traditional teachings can be used as a guide on any life journey.

Lafontaine's participation in his community helped him become a Métis Youth Role Model during the 2014 to 2015 school year. The role models are chosen based on their achievements within the Métis community.

Today, Lafontaine is looking forward to university and a future career as a medical doctor. He remains involved with

the Aboriginal Ambassador Program to continue building the bridge between the Métis' past and future. Jesse declares, "Without the next generation of Métis learning and sharing Métis history and practices, the culture will disappear."

FIGURE 4.7 Jesse and his paddle team on Okanagan Lake

"WITHOUT THE NEXT GENERATION OF MÉTIS LEARNING AND SHARING MÉTIS HISTORY AND PRACTICES, THE CULTURE WILL DISAPPEAR."



A CALL TO ACTION

1. What can you do to strengthen the links between your culture's past and future? How might this benefit your life and the lives of others within your culture?
2. In what ways can you learn about your cultural identity? What cultural organizations are there in your community that might help you do this?

DEFENDING RIEL

Following his arrest, Riel was placed in a Regina jail for eight weeks. On July 20, 1885, Riel’s trial began. He pleaded not guilty to a charge of treason. Examine **Figure 4.8**, a photo of Riel on trial in the courtroom. What information about the trial can you gather from the photo? Initially, the trial was to be held in Winnipeg, but it was moved to Regina. At the time, Winnipeg had a larger Métis population than Regina. The government was worried a Winnipeg jury would be made up of people supportive of Riel. In Regina, the final jury was made up of English-speaking Protestants. Only one of the jurors spoke French, Riel’s first language.

FIGURE 4.8 A photo at Riel’s trial in 1885. Riel is standing in the prisoner’s box. **Analyze:** Why do you think so many people attended Riel’s trial?



Riel’s lawyers planned to portray Riel as insane so that he could not be held responsible for his actions. Riel refused to go along with their strategy. He felt that if he was declared insane, the Métis cause would not be recognized properly. Read **Figure 4.9**. How did Riel defend himself? Though his first language was French, Riel spoke English during the trial so the jurors, lawyers, and judge could understand him. **Figure 4.10** is a quote from Riel’s closing statement, explaining his reasons for the resistance. Based on **Figure 4.9** and **Figure 4.10**, which of Riel’s actions did he think were the most significant?

FIGURE 4.9 A quote from Riel during his 1885 trial, made in English. **Analyze:** How does Riel want the jury to judge him?

“I was not taken prisoner. I surrendered on purpose. I want to be judged on the merits of my actions.... From the time of my arrival in Saskatchewan, I worked peacefully ... We didn’t make any aggressive military moves.... In Batoche we defended ourselves.”
— Louis Riel, Métis leader

“No one can say that the North West was not suffering last year ... but what I have done, and risked, and to which I have exposed myself, rested certainly on the conviction I had to do, was called upon to do something for my country.... I know that through the grace of God I am the founder of Manitoba.... Even if I was going to be sentenced by you, gentlemen of the jury, I have the satisfaction if I die—that if I die I will not be reputed by all men as insane, as a lunatic.... Gentlemen of the jury, my reputation, my liberty, my life are at your discretion.”
— Louis Riel, Métis leader

FIGURE 4.10 An excerpt from Riel’s closing statement to the judge and jury at his trial in 1885. His closing statement was also made in English. **Analyze:** What does the statement “my country” imply about the Métis in Canada?

RIEL’S SENTENCING

After a four-day trial, the jury found Riel guilty of treason, but recommended mercy, which surprised many. Riel’s last chance lay in an appeal, or request, to the federal government. Only the federal government could reverse his sentence. As newspapers across the country expressed opinions on what Riel’s sentence should be, many Canadians began to take sides. Read **Figure 4.11**, a quote from Barrie, Ontario, newspaper the *Northern Advance*. What evidence does this author use as proof of Riel’s guilt? In contrast, French Catholic Canada saw Riel as a heroic defender of French and Catholic rights. If Prime Minister Macdonald freed Riel, he would offend English Canada. If he punished Riel harshly, he would lose Québec’s support. **Figure 4.12** is a cartoon showing Macdonald’s difficult decision. What does the cartoon tell you about Macdonald’s position? In the end, Macdonald and his cabinet decided to hang Riel. Riel was executed on November 16, 1885.

THE AFTERMATH

For weeks after the trial, the Canadian public debated Riel’s death sentence. In Québec, the politicians stirred up the anger of the French and Catholic population over Riel’s sentence. After Riel was hanged, crowds gathered to protest the federal government’s actions. Riel was seen in Québec not as a defender of the Métis, but as the defender of Catholic Francophones. The anger of many French Canadians was so fierce that the news of their demonstrations was reported internationally. Even to this day, the decision to execute Riel is controversial.

“He may be insane enough to declare himself the [Prophet] ... of the half-breeds, but quite sane enough to be responsible for his acts of rebellion and murder.”
— Northern Advance

FIGURE 4.11 A quote from the May 21, 1885, edition of the *Northern Advance* newspaper. **Analyze:** What does the use of the word *rebellion* rather than *resistance* reveal about the perspective of the author?

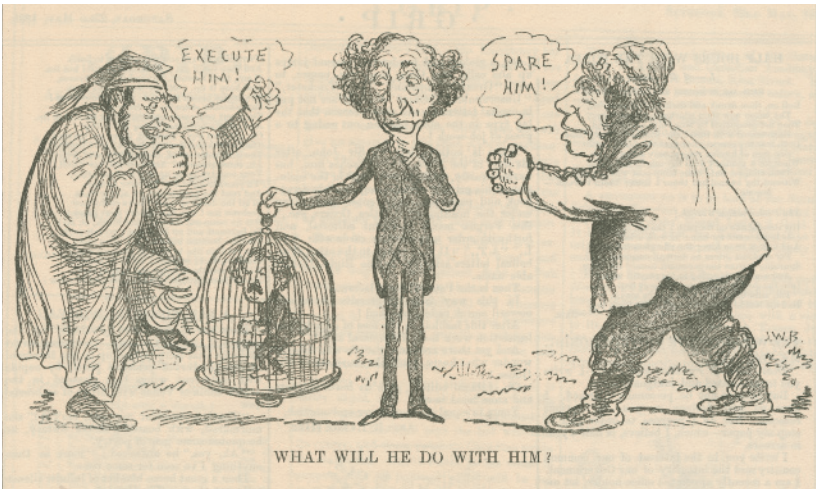


FIGURE 4.12 This political cartoon from 1885 by J.W. Bengough shows the different reactions of English and French politicians to Riel’s sentence. Macdonald is shown holding Riel in a birdcage. **Analyze:** What can you infer about the cartoonist’s choice to place Riel in a birdcage?

CHECK-IN

- CONTINUITY AND CHANGE** Compare the 1870 Red River Resistance and the 1885 Northwest Resistance. How does Riel’s attempt at another resistance show progress or decline for the Métis?
- HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE** If the Riel trial were to occur today, do you think an English-speaking Protestant jury would come to the same judgment? Why?
- EVALUATE AND DRAW CONCLUSIONS** Do you think Macdonald made the right decision to execute Riel? Why, and why not?