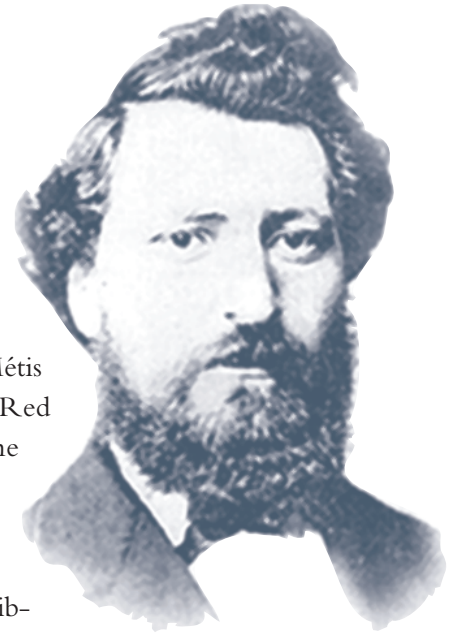


# LOUIS RIEL

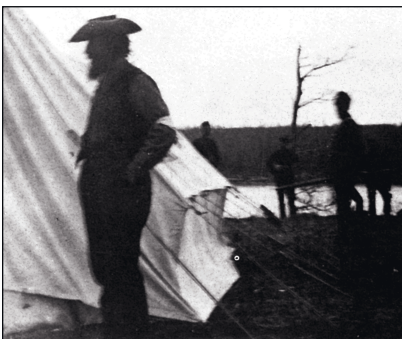
1844 - 1885



Louis Riel was a French, Catholic Métis who was born in St. Boniface, Red River Settlement in 1844. When he was a boy, Riel was sent to Montreal to be educated, and later became an apprentice to a Quebec based lawyer. He returned to Red River in 1868 to assist his mother and siblings after the death of his father. On his trip home Louis heard stories of the conditions and the unrest beginning to grow in the settlements on the banks of the Red River. He started to understand the plight of the Métis and their fear of losing their way of life and ancestral lands.



Louis Riel and the Provisional Council in 1869.



Riel under arrest near Batoche, SK in May, 1885.

During the Red River Resistance of 1869, Riel objected to the unlawful entry of the Canadian Government into the west, saying he believed the west had the right to negotiate its own terms of entry into Confederation. The Métis tried to protect the rights of all who lived there—First Nation, Métis and European settlers. The provisional government, with Riel as leader, drew up a *List of Rights* to present to the Canadian government. Through Louis Riel's leadership, the *Manitoba Act* was successfully negotiated, and in July 1870, the province of Manitoba was founded. On Feb. 23, 1870, Prime Minister John A. MacDonald was quoted as saying, "These impulsive half-breeds have got spoiled by this emeute (uprising) and must be kept down by a strong hand until they are swamped by the influx of settlers." Within the next 10 years, Métis families in the Red River area lost their land and homes to incoming settlers, even though the *Manitoba Act of 1870* guaranteed Métis rights to their land, and an additional 1.4 million acres of land for Métis children.

Riel was elected to parliament three times, but was never able to take his seat because of political pressure and a \$5,000 bounty put on his head by the Ontario legislature—when Ontario had no jurisdiction in the matter. Riel was forced into exile in the United States. In 1884, answering a desperate call sent out from his people, Riel returned to Canada and, once again, tried to protect the rights to the land and way of life of western landowners in Saskatchewan. His plea was answered with a military response from the Canadian government, and the

Northwest Resistance arose. Believing that the rights of western landowners were being unjustly decided in Ontario newspapers, where facts had been seriously misrepresented or ignored, Riel surrendered on May 15, 1885 and welcomed a public trial to tell the story of the Métis. A jury comprised of English, Protestant, non-aboriginal jurors found him guilty of treason, but recommended mercy. The judge, Hugh Richardson, however, ignored the jury's suggestion and sentenced Riel to death. One juror wrote to Parliament: "Had the Government done their duty and redressed the grievances of the half-breeds of Saskatchewan ... there would never have been a second Riel Rebellion, and consequently no prisoner to try and condemn." Yet, on November 16, 1885, Louis Riel was hung in Regina, as a message from Prime Minister MacDonal to the Métis and others who challenged Canada's western expansion goals.

In 1992, Riel was formally given status as a founding father of Manitoba. In 1998, the Government of Canada issued a *Statement of Reconciliation* and referred to "the sad events culminating in the death of the Métis leader, Louis Riel," and the need to find ways of "reflecting Louis Riel's proper place in Canada's history." In 2004, Prime Minister Paul Martin acknowledged that Riel's contribution was not only "to the Metis Nation, but to Canada as a whole."

Riel fought for the rights of all landowners in Western Canada, including First Nation people, Métis people, and European settlers; he fought for the protection of language rights for both French and English speaking people, even though he himself spoke French and French was the dominant language in Red River; and he dreamed of the day when the religious prejudices of Europe would not impact people in what is now Canada. Yet, ironically, after his death Riel became a symbol of racial, lingual, and religious divisions in Canada. Today, significant issues that Riel fought and died for remain unresolved.

Every year on November 16th, the anniversary of the death of Louis Riel, Canadians from across the homeland come together to remember the man, his cause and his legacy.

For more information, go to:  
*Métis Law in Canada* by Jean Teillet  
[www.pstlaw.ca./publications.html](http://www.pstlaw.ca./publications.html)



Lawyer Jean Teillet, a descendant of Louis Riel, holds aloft a copy of the Powley Supreme Court decision at a Riel Day ceremony on the lawn of Queen's Park in Toronto.



MNO Senators and Veterans lead the procession at a Riel Day ceremony on November 16th at Queen's Park in Toronto.