

Louis Riel, Metis leader, founder of Manitoba (1844-1885)



Louis Riel was born in 1844 in Saint Boniface, Red River Settlement, in what is now a part of Winnipeg, Manitoba. At the time, the community was considered a part of Rupert's Land, administered by the Hudson's Bay Company. His father, Louis Riel, Sr. was a businessman and political leader in the predominantly Metis community that lived in the Red River Colony, and likely influenced his son's strong convictions and interest in politics. Riel was the eldest of 11 siblings and his family was well-respected in the community due to Riel Sr's involvement in local politics and the family's strong Catholic faith.

Young Louis Riel was a standout student from his earliest days attending school, and in 1857, when he was just 13, the Catholic clergy in the Red River community determined that he would make an exemplary priest, and he was offered a scholarship to study at a seminary in Montreal. Wishing to pursue a greater education, Riel set off to Montreal and continued to be an exemplary student and developed a passion for poetry that stuck throughout his life.

In 1864, after learning of his father's sudden death, and after an engagement to a young French-Canadian woman from Montreal was ended due to her parents' refusal to allow her to marry a young Metis man, Riel lost interest in the priesthood and moved back to the Red River Settlement, impoverished and distraught. He made his way back out West, working odd jobs in Chicago and St. Paul, Minnesota along the way, arriving back in Red River in 1868 when he was 24 years old.

In 1869, the Hudson's Bay Company sold Rupert's Land and the North-West Territory to the Dominion of Canada, to be administered and developed as its leaders sought to expand its territory from sea to sea. The Red River Settlement was comprised of a majority Metis and First Nation people, and upon purchasing the land, the Dominion of Canada sent many land surveyors to determine its suitability for railroad and urban development. The influx of Anglophone Protestant surveyors and settlers from Ontario worried Riel, who believed that their presence would cause linguistic, racial, and religious tension with the predominantly French Catholic Metis and First Nation populations, and because Metis people did not possess true ownership of their land, leading to fear that they would be displaced.

To respond to these concerns the Metis organized the Metis National Committee to represent their collective cause, and the young, educated Riel was elected as its leader after denouncing the land surveys that were to take place in a speech to the Metis community. Under his leadership the Metis National Committee disrupted and put an end to the land surveys using civil disobedience on October 11, 1869. When the regional leadership of HBC summoned Riel to explain his actions, he stated that any attempt by Canada to assert authority over Red River Settlement would be disrupted unless Ottawa negotiated political and land terms with the community first. A month later, Ottawa sent its newly-appointed Anglophone Lieutenant-Governor to Red River, only to be turned back by Metis activists on November 2—the same day a Metis group led by Riel seized Upper Fort Garry—the centre of HBC's activity in Red River, to prove to Ottawa that the Metis would not back down without a fight. These moments in Canadian history came to be known as the **Red River Rebellion**, and represent the political beginnings that would result in the entrance of Manitoba into Canadian Confederation.

Following the seizure of Upper Fort Garry, in December 1869 the Metis National Committee established a provisional government led by Louis Riel, and aimed to negotiate fair political and land terms before Ottawa asserted authority over the community. The provisional government issued a declaration on behalf of the

people of Rupert's Land that rejected Canada's claim of authority over the land, and proposed that a settlement be negotiated between Ottawa and Riel's provisional government.

The prominence of Riel's provisional government did not sit well with all of the Anglophone protestant community, and a small group of Scottish Protestants formed with the goal of disbanding the provisional government. This worried the Metis government, and the group was rounded up and imprisoned at Upper Fort Garry. Two of the three prisoners were pardoned, but a third, Thomas Scott, was ordered to be executed by firing squad. On March 4, 1870, Scott was executed despite pleas to Riel that the execution would likely complicate negotiations with Ottawa.

While both Riel's government and Ottawa downplayed the execution as punishing a difficult individual, Scott's execution angered much of Protestant Ontario, furious that a Metis Francophone Catholic would summarily execute one of their own. Despite this, on May 12, 1870, the Metis delegates reached an agreement with the Canadian government in the form of the Manitoba Act, and the Province of Manitoba entered into Confederation. The most important part of the Manitoba Act to the Metis was the creation of a 1.4 million acre reserve for their community to continue to live, and a guarantee that the province would be officially bilingual.

Shortly thereafter Ottawa sent a military force, known as the Red River Expedition, to Manitoba as an "errand of peace" however it was not consented to by Riel or the provisional government, and it was not included in the terms of agreement. To Riel and the Metis, it was clear that the force was sent to Red River to hold Riel accountable for his role in the execution of Thomas Scott, and he fled Manitoba to the United States to avoid arrest and likely execution.

While a fugitive, he was elected three times to the Canadian House of Commons, 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 resurface and influence his actions, and throughout this time he succumbed to mental illness in the form of violent outbursts and displaying signs of megalomania. He married in 1881 while in exile in Montana, and fathered three children.

Riel returned to what is now the province of Saskatchewan to represent Métis grievances to the Canadian government. This resistance escalated into a military confrontation known as the North-West Rebellion of 1885. It ended in his arrest, trial, and execution on a charge of high treason. Many view his execution as a compromise that Prime Minister Macdonald was required to make in order to prevent widespread rebellion and rioting among Anglophone Protestants in Ontario, who continued to despise Riel for his role in Thomas Scott's execution. Riel was viewed sympathetically in Francophone regions of Canada, and his execution had a lasting influence on relations between the province of Quebec and English-speaking Canada. Whether seen as a Father of Confederation or a traitor, he remains one of the most complex, controversial, and ultimately tragic figures in the history of Canada. Today, Riel is known as something of a Canadian folk-hero for his efforts to safeguard the culture and autonomy of the Metis people.