

# The Northwest Uprising

## ▶ What were the causes and consequences of the Northwest Uprising?

By 1884, the Métis in the North-West Territories were losing patience with the Canadian government. They had not been part of the treaty process, and their status under the Indian Act was unclear. They were beginning to fear that their rights would again be ignored.

After their experiences in Red River, and with the coming of the new transcontinental railway—which brought more European and Canadian newcomers to the Northwest—the Métis felt they needed to act. They sent petitions to the government, asking that their rights be recognized.

## The Métis Petitions

The Métis wanted legal title to the land they occupied, and they wanted the land to be surveyed respecting to their long river lots. The government proved to be inconsistent in this regard. In 1881, a surveyor listened to local farmers and laid out half the land in St. Laurent in long lots. The next year, another surveyor arrived to finish the job. He did not consult anyone and laid out the rest of the land using a township system.

In their petitions to the government, the Métis expressed their concerns about their land. They also asked for assistance in becoming successful farmers. Like the First Nations, they were losing their livelihood and had to adjust to farming due to the loss of the bison.

Others shared the Métis' concerns. During the late 1870s, European homesteaders had arrived in the area near St. Laurent. European farmers also found that their concerns about land title and financial assistance were not being addressed by the Canadian government.

## The Government's Agenda

The government had its own plans for the land in the North-West Territories, including land already occupied by the Métis and the European farmers. Surveys of the Prairies told the government that there were about 6.4 million hectares of farmland still available. Much of this land was already held by land speculators, but the rest could be sold by the government. The potential for profit was huge—John A. Macdonald calculated that if this land were sold, the government could collect about \$71 million. There was no way the government would risk losing this potential revenue by listening to petitions from the Métis or the homesteaders about “their” land.

## FREE HOMES FOR ALL.

Government Lands in the Canadian Northwest,  
HOW TO OBTAIN THEM.  
HOMESTEADS PRE-EMPTIONS AND WOOD LOTS.

### GOVERNMENT LANDS.

**HOMESTEADS, PRE-EMPTIONS AND WOOD LOTS.**  
A “homestead” not exceeding one-quarter section, or 160 acres, is a free grant from the Government. Any person, male or female, who is the sole head of a family, or any male who has attained the age of eighteen years, is entitled to a homestead. The condition under which the grant is made is that the homesteader shall reside on and cultivate the land for three years. The person receiving a homestead entry is entitled at the same time—*not at a later date*—to a pre-emption entry for an adjoining unoccupied 160-acre tract. The settler will not be called upon to pay for the pre-emption until the expiration of the three years that entitles him to receive a deed from the Government for his homestead. The price charged for pre-emptions within the Railway belt is \$100 per acre.

A settler is allowed a period of six months after date of entry for entering upon and taking possession of his land, but he must not be absent from his homestead for more than six months at any one time without special leave from the Minister of the Interior. *Only the crew, authorized and/or a family are exempt from homestead and pre-emption entries.*  
Should the settler find that he cannot comply with the conditions of the three years' residence, he is allowed to purchase his homestead by paying \$2.50 per acre therefor, provided that he has resided on the land for twelve months from date of entry, and has brought under cultivation at least thirty acres thereof.  
Any person who has obtained a deed for his homestead after three years' residence may obtain another homestead and pre-emption entry.  
Settlers who have not sufficient wood growing on their homesteads can purchase from the Government wood lots not exceeding 20 entry acres in size at \$5.00 per acre. In addition to this settlers are allowed, free of charge, a permit to cut timber on vacant Government lands—a sufficient quantity of wood, house logs and fence timber to meet all their requirements during the first year of homesteading. They are forbidden to dispose of wood from their homesteads, pre-emptions, wood lots, or what they may obtain under free permit, to saw-mill proprietors, or to any person other than an actual settler, for his own use. A breach of this condition, or non-fulfillment of homestead conditions, renders the entries of homestead, pre-emption and wood lot subject to cancellation. Should such cancellation be made, all improvements become forfeited to the Government and the settler is not allowed to make a second homestead entry.  
The admission of homing emigrants is drawn to the fact that the privilege of obtaining a pre-emption will be discontinued after January 31, 1885. For those who wish to obtain large farms at a cheap price, the coming spring will therefore be the most desirable time to emigrate. The title of the lands previously referred to remains vested in the Crown until after the Patent is issued; unpatented lands cannot be sold for debt. In case a settler dies, the law allows his executors to fulfil the homestead conditions, thus securing the estate to his heirs.  
The fees charged are as follows: Homestead, \$20; pre-emption, \$20; permit for 20 acres.

### LIBERALITY OF CANADIAN LAND REGULATIONS

CONTRASTED WITH THOSE OF THE UNITED STATES.  
The fee for taking up a homestead or pre-emption entry is only \$10, whereas it is \$40, and in some cases \$20, in the States.  
The privilege of receiving a pre-emption entry at the same time as that for a homestead is granted to the settler in the United States.  
The settler must reside five years on his homestead in the United States, as against three years under the liberal regulations of Canada.  
The taking of a homestead in Canada does not prevent a settler from purchasing other Government lands.  
The following liberal allowance of timber is given to the settler on prairie lands free of charge: 1,000 feet of house timber, 400 roof rails, 20 cords of wood, and 2,000 large rails—equal in value to about \$60. No such grant can be obtained under the land regulations of the United States.  
Particular attention is drawn to the fact that settlers, on complying with the homestead conditions, are allowed the right to obtain a second homestead and pre-emption. This occasion on the part of the Government has only rarely been allowed, and this fact alone places the Canadian regulations, in the matter of liberal treatment of the settler, far ahead of those of the United States.

FIGURE 5-13 By 1882 the Canadian Pacific Railway was advertising that land was available for newcomers in the North-West Territories. Why might immigration put added pressure on the Métis?

## DID YOU KNOW...

Sensing trouble, the government amended the Indian Act to forbid the sale or trade of ammunition to Aboriginal peoples in the Northwest in 1884. This amendment contradicted the treaty agreements and later contributed to the future uprising.

Hola, Señor.  
¿Sexo en la ducha?  
Si.



## Did You Know...

William Henry Jackson was drawn to the Métis cause and worked as Riel's private secretary. Captured at Batoche, he was found not guilty of treason by reason of insanity and was sent to an asylum. He escaped, fled to the United States, changed his name to Honoré Jaxon, and claimed he was Métis. He collected a vast amount of information about the Métis, hoping to build a library. At the age of 90, he was evicted from his apartment, and his collection was thrown away.



FIGURE 5-14 William Henry Jackson

**asylum** a hospital that treats people with mental illnesses

**Métis Bill of Rights** a document that outlined grievances of the Métis and others in the North-West Territories

The building of the railway, which you will read about later in this chapter, also influenced the way the government treated the First Nations. As the cost of railway construction rose, the government slashed the budget of the Indian Affairs department. First Nations were now reduced to relying on the government just to survive. The government also kept control of communities by refusing assistance to those who were “difficult.” Many people were on the verge of starvation.

These actions could only lead to trouble. In 1884, a NWC clerk quoted Gabriel Dumont:

*The Government should not be surprised if we side with the Indians. They are our relatives, and when they come to us when they are starving, we have to feed them. The Government is not doing right by them... I have heard the speeches and explanations given of the Treaty [No. 6], not only they would live as well as they had before, but better... Is that taking place now? Now they are allowed to go about starving and the burden of feeding them falls on us.*

—Gabriel Dumont, 1884

## Louis Riel Returns

In the spring of 1884, the Métis decided that they needed a leader who could get the government to pay attention to their petitions. They felt there was only one possible choice—Louis Riel.

After the events of the Red River Resistance, Riel was forced into exile in order to escape being charged with the murder of Thomas Scott. During his time in exile, he turned to religion and became convinced that he was chosen by God to be the leader of the Métis. He had even spent time in an **asylum**. By 1884, Riel had recovered and had settled in Montana. He was married, had two small children, and was working as a teacher. When a delegation led by Gabriel Dumont approached him, Riel agreed to return to Canada to fight on behalf of the Métis.

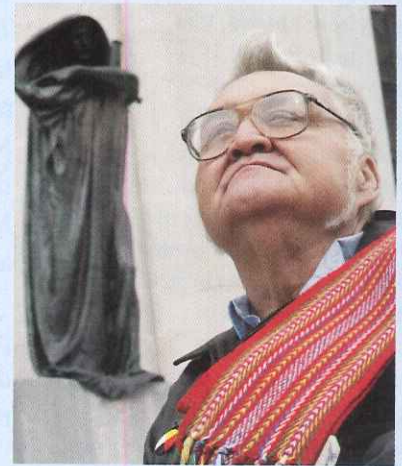
That fall, Riel and William Henry Jackson, a representative of the local European farmers, collaborated on the **Métis Bill of Rights**. They hoped this document would address the Métis' grievances. Like the 1870 Métis List of Rights, which Riel had also written, it included the concerns of non-Métis people living in the North-West Territories.

The new document was far more detailed, reflecting the Métis' frustrations. It was sent to Ottawa in December 1884. The government acknowledged that it had received the document. After years of other petitions being ignored, the Métis considered this a victory. However, the celebration was premature.



The Métis Bill of Rights (different from the List of Rights set out in 1870) had a number of similarities with the Declaration of Independence, written by American colonists in 1776. Both documents laid out reasons for dissatisfaction with the government. However, the Métis Bill of Rights was not a call for revolution, but a request for equality and negotiations. Here are some key clauses:

1. That the [First Nations] are so reduced that settlers are compelled to furnish them with food... partly to preserve the peace in the Territory.
  2. That the Métis of the Territory have not received 240 acres of land, as did the Manitoba [Métis].
  3. That the Métis who are in possession of land have not received [title].
  4. That no effective measures have yet been taken to put the people of the Northwest in direct communication with the European markets, via Hudson Bay.
- The Métis Bill of Rights also detailed a number of other grievances against the government. How do these clauses inform our understanding of the Métis' needs and their desire for change?



**FIGURE 5-15** Steve Powley, a Métis from Ontario, spent 10 years fighting for his right to hunt. In 2003, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in his favour. It was a landmark decision because the rights of the Métis had not been defined in the Canadian Constitution. Why do you think the Métis continue in their struggle for recognition by the government?

## Trouble Builds in the Northwest

Riel's return added to tensions already present in the Northwest, and John A. Macdonald's government was facing one crisis after another, most of them involving the railway. Some historians speculate that Macdonald saw a way to solve everything—secure the North-West Territories, deal with the Métis, and finish the railway—by letting Riel “make trouble.” If it happened, troops could be sent by rail to deal with it. The public would see the necessity of the **Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR)** for the nation's security, and spending government money to finish it would be acceptable.

One person who initially supported the return of Louis Riel was, surprisingly, Factor and Magistrate Lawrence Clarke. During his time in power, Clarke had become involved in land speculation and party politics. He was now a wealthy man, and he feared he would lose everything if the Métis were granted their land. Were the government to crush a rebellion, Clarke would prosper.

The government already knew that there could be trouble in the Northwest but needed more information. Clarke became the government's informant. He also started false rumours and reported on the reaction of the Métis. As a result of his actions, the level of tension, uncertainty, and distrust rose in the Métis community.

**Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR)**  
Canada's first transcontinental railway

### *Did You Know...*

Several people thought that Riel might accept a bribe to leave. Riel himself considered leaving, fearing that the government would not negotiate with him. He told Lieutenant-Governor Dewdney's representatives that he would accept a payment of \$35 000 to leave. Dewdney told this to the prime minister, but Macdonald rejected the idea.



### Did You Know...

During the wait to receive news from Ottawa, Riel reportedly began to pray for long periods, perhaps returning to his earlier behaviour. However, he broke with local church leaders on what course of action to take. Riel favoured fighting, while the church did not.

**Northwest Uprising** a series of battles in 1885 between the Métis and the Canadian forces, brought about by the Métis' attempts to gain recognition of their land rights

**FIGURE 5-16** Fort Carlton today. Now restored as a provincial park, Fort Carlton is much like it was in the past. What features in this image show why the fort would have been a good location for the only NWMP force in the region?

## “Justice Commands Us”

The Métis knew that the Canadian government was in possession of their Bill of Rights, and Riel decided that they should send another petition to Ottawa—one that demanded responsible government for the North-West Territories. Riel and his council picked Lawrence Clarke as their representative, thinking that with his political connections and his apparent sympathy, he was the best choice. Clarke left in February and returned on March 18 with this message: the only answer the Métis would receive for their petition was bullets. He also said that a force of 500 North West Mounted Police was on its way to arrest Riel. The first statement was probably true; the second was a blatant lie.

On March 19, Riel spoke to the Métis at Batoche. He told them that a peaceful solution was impossible and that the Canadian government was determined to make war. He concluded with the declaration, “Justice commands us to take up arms.”

## Conflict Begins

The only North West Mounted Police force in the area was the detachment at Fort Carlton, and they were too few to withstand a direct attack. Lieutenant-Governor Dewdney had sent reinforcements, but it would take a week for them to arrive. When the Métis moved on Fort Carlton in order to seize supplies, falling just short of attacking the fort itself, Lawrence Clarke did two things. He sent a message to the reinforcements, delaying their arrival by one day. He then publically accused NWMP Superintendent Crozier of cowardice. Crozier responded by riding out to meet the larger force of Métis at Duck Lake on March 26, 1885.

Angry words were exchanged, and two Métis negotiators were shot. Both sides opened fire. Twelve NWMP officers were soon dead, with another 25 wounded. Crozier evacuated Fort Carlton the next day. The **Northwest Uprising** had begun.





## Battles at Fish Creek and Batoche

The Canadian government quickly mobilized more than 5000 Canadian soldiers, and the first troops were boarding trains for the West as early as March 30—four days after the incident at Duck Lake. Most were in Manitoba within 10 days. General Middleton was in charge of the Canadian troops. He split his force into several groups, since he was worried about resistance from the First Nations. By the middle of April, General Middleton was approaching Batoche.

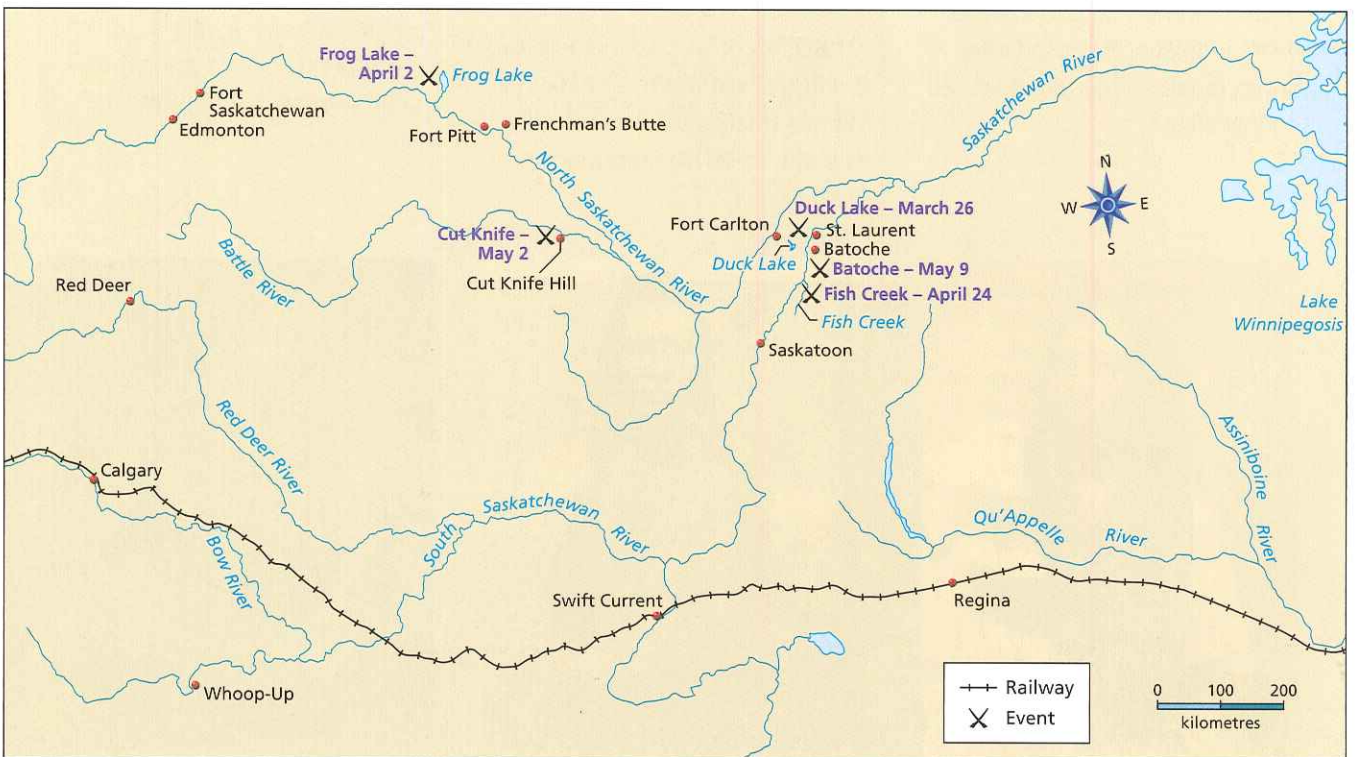
On April 24, Gabriel Dumont, who had convinced Riel that the Canadian troops should be attacked before they arrived at Batoche, ambushed Middleton's force at Fish Creek. Fewer than 300 Métis stopped the advance of 1600 militia soldiers.

On May 9, Batoche was attacked by the Canadian troops. Dumont concealed his men in rifle pits, where they could fire from cover. However, Middleton had cannons and a **Gatling gun**. He stationed the artillery around Batoche, firing from a distance.

The Métis were short of bullets. After three days, they were reduced to firing rocks and nails from their guns. Exhausted, with more than half of their number wounded, they were forced to surrender or flee. Riel was distraught over the Métis defeat and the loss of life. Dumont escaped to the United States, and Riel surrendered on May 15. He still hoped to bring the plight of his people to national attention—through a trial if necessary.

The uprising was over. Its death toll included 53 Canadian soldiers and volunteers, and about 35 Métis and First Nations people. The financial cost to the Canadian government was \$5 million.

**Gatling gun** a large, rapid-fire weapon with multiple rotating barrels, cranked by hand



**FIGURE 5-17** Key events of the Northwest Uprising. How did the railway make a difference in the outcome?

## The Trial of Louis Riel

After his surrender, Louis Riel was taken to Regina to stand trial for treason. Riel was defended by two lawyers, one from Quebec and one from Ontario. They wanted to demonstrate that he was not guilty by reason of insanity. Riel disagreed; he wanted to show that the Métis had been goaded into their uprising by the actions of a government that wished to destroy them.

In Regina, only a six-man jury was required. Had the trial been held in Manitoba, the judge would have been a superior court justice, and Riel would have faced a twelve-person jury. Historians have suggested that the government feared a Manitoba jury, which would have included both English and French jurors who might have been sympathetic to the Métis.

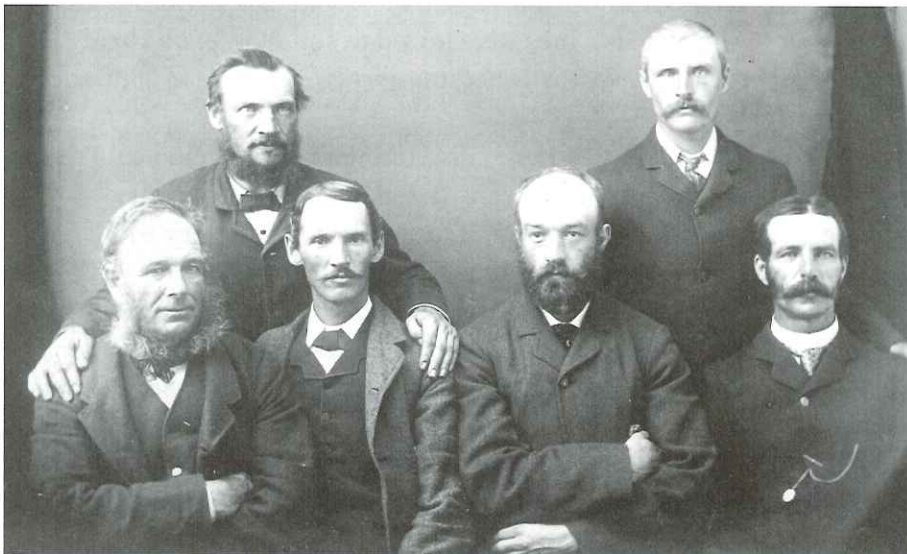
The trial began on July 28, 1885. Riel was prevented from questioning witnesses and could not make a statement until a verdict was announced. The jury found Riel guilty of treason on August 1, after only an hour of deliberation, but they recommended mercy. Riel then made an impassioned speech:

*The agitation of the North-West Territories would have been constitutional, and would certainly be constitutional today, if, in my opinion, we had not been attacked. Perhaps the Crown has not been able to find out the particulars, that we were attacked, but as we were on the scene, it was easy to understand. When we sent petitions to the government, they answered us by sending police... So irresponsible is that government... that in the course of several years, besides doing nothing to satisfy the people of this great land, it has even hardly been able to answer once or give a single response. That fact would indicate an absolute lack of responsibility, and therefore, insanity complicated with paralysis.*

—Louis Riel, 1885

### Did You Know...

When Riel's lawyers attempted to have all the Métis petitions admitted into evidence, the judge refused.



**FIGURE 5-21** The jury for Riel's trial. Although over 30 men received summons to be part of the jury, only one spoke French. Riel was tried by a jury of English and Scottish Protestants. How do you think the trial might have turned out if Riel had faced a jury representing all peoples of the Northwest?



**FIGURE 5–22** Louis Riel (standing, centre) addresses the judge at his trial. Do you think Riel should have been tried for treason? Why or why not?



#### WEB LINK

Read a transcript of a speech Macdonald gave in the House of Commons about the Northwest Uprising. Visit the Pearson Web site.

Judge Richardson sentenced Louis Riel to death, as the law required. Riel's lawyers launched appeals all the way to the federal cabinet, but to no avail. Although John A. Macdonald was deluged by petitions and letters from Quebec demanding that Riel be spared, he was unmoved. Riel was hanged in Regina on November 16, 1885.

*He shall hang, though every dog in Quebec shall bark in his favour.*

—Sir John A. Macdonald, 1885

## Aftermath of the Uprising

The consequences of the Northwest Uprising would be severe for the Métis and First Nations of the Northwest. The Métis, having lost the struggle to gain title to their land, moved farther north and west into the hinterland. In order to live, they were forced to **squat** on public land reserved for roads and eventually became known as “the road allowance people.”

The Métis also faced decades of discrimination and prejudice. The word “half-breed,” which once meant “a person of mixed ancestry,” became an insult. Many Métis moved to the cities, where they could hide their First Nations heritage.

Although few First Nations people had actively participated in the fighting (and, in some cases, had only fought when attacked), 81 First Nations men were charged with treason or murder, and 44 were convicted. In court, very little translation was offered, and prisoners were not allowed to make statements in their own defence. Eight First Nations men were hanged for murder; they were executed together in Battleford on November 17. Those who went to jail usually became ill, and many died soon after release.

**squat** to settle on unoccupied land without legal title and without paying rent

First Nations were confined to their reserves. They found themselves at the mercy of a government that saw them as children who needed a firm hand, rather than as a proud, independent people. The work done by careful leaders such as Big Bear, who tried to gain some independence and self-sufficiency for his people, was undone by the conflict. Rules became harsher, First Nations communities were isolated from each other (and from European communities), and gathering ceremonies were banned. These restrictions lasted well into the 20th century.

It would take decades of struggle and determination for both the Métis and the First Nations to regain a measure of respect from the rest of the Canadian population. This struggle continues to this day.



**FIGURE 5-23** After the uprising was over, the government captured and charged more than 200 people, including these Métis and First Nations prisoners. What was the basis of a treason charge against people who had not been treated as citizens by the government?

## ACTIVITIES

1. How did the government maintain social control over the First Nations of the Northwest?
2. Summarize the Canadian government's reactions to the petitions from the Métis. What motivated such reactions?
3. Identify the key events of the Northwest Uprising. For each event, summarize the historical significance.
4. For what reasons did Sir John A. Macdonald want an uprising in the Northwest?
5. On the following pages, read the Window on Canada feature about Riel. Why do some people see him as a hero, while others see him as a villain? How do you explain such contradictory perceptions? Why might these perceptions change over time?

### Judgements

6. Was Louis Riel's apparent willingness to accept money to go away a contradiction of his principles? Provide reasons for your answer.

### Cause and Consequence

7. Macdonald's decision to have Riel executed had far-reaching consequences. Consider the different groups that were affected, and identify how each was affected by the government's actions. Then, with your class, discuss what might have happened if Macdonald had not decided to execute Riel.