

(Assignment #4)

The Trials of Louis Riel

To a large degree, this military expedition was the result of the Riel government's execution of Thomas Scott on March 4, 1870. Scott, an Orangeman (Irish Protestant) from Ontario, had come to the Red River as a land surveyor and participated in a raid on Fort Garry to free it from Métis control. Accused of hostility toward the Riel government, abuse of his guards and inciting the other prisoners to violence, Scott was found guilty of treason and shot.

Justified or not, the execution of Scott raised a storm of protest in Ontario, where anti-French and anti-Catholic feelings flared up once again. In Quebec, the shooting of Scott was considered to be a necessary part of the Métis struggle for French-Canadian rights. Riel warned of the imminent arrival of the Canadian militia force and fearing for his life, since the Macdonald government had not yet granted an anticipated amnesty, fled.

Riel was twice elected a Manitoba Member of Parliament in the 1870s, but was never allowed to take his seat in the House of Commons. In fact, he travelled to Ottawa under the danger of arrest by Ontario police for the execution of Thomas Scott. Following his expulsion from the House of Commons in 1874, Riel was granted a partial amnesty, but only on the condition of being banished from Canada for five years.

The anxiety experienced by Riel, as a result of these events, was too much. He spent two of the fifteen years after the Red River uprising in psychiatric hospitals in Quebec before drifting to the United States. In Montana, he married, had a family and earned a living by trading and teaching school. In July, 1884, Riel returned to Canada, joining the Métis at Batoche along the banks of the North Saskatchewan River where most Métis had moved after the Red River uprising.

Native Unrest

The Northwest Rebellion of 1885 had much in common with the earlier Red River rebellion. After acquiring their land claims, in the 1870 Manitoba Act, many of the Métis sold their land to speculators and drifted west to the empty banks of the North Saskatchewan River as settlement spread in Manitoba. Here they joined other Métis who had occupied strips of land on the pattern of earlier settlements at Red River.

By 1884, as the Canadian Pacific Railway approached, civilization was threatening them once more on the Saskatchewan River. Expecting a heavy immigration westward, the federal government had, in the early 1880's, sent out teams of surveyors who laid out townships into 160-acre plots, as surveyors had done at Red River. Again the Métis feared for the titles to their land as the Canadian government turned a deaf ear to their requests for official titles to the land they were now living on. Native tribes on the plains shared the Métis confusion and fears.

Although the creation of the North West Mounted Police by the Macdonald government in 1873, along with a series of treaties setting up a system of reservations, had helped to overcome some of their concerns, by the mid-1880's, many tribes had not accepted the government's attempts to change their lifestyle to that of farming from the traditional hunting and fur trading. Indeed, the disappearance of the buffalo, which had been slaughtered in incredible numbers within a few years, served only to deepen native unrest as famine spread and the Canadian government failed to provide the materials agreed upon in earlier treaties. To make matters worse, crop failures, falling wheat prices and the high costs of transportation and shipping freight on the new railway, served to frustrate the already settled population, in the early 1880's. Meetings among both whites and Métis resulted in a series of petitions being sent to the federal government.

Ottawa Reacts

Ottawa's reaction was to ignore the situation. At a Prince Albert meeting in the spring of 1884, attended by all groups of settlers, a resolution was passed to invite Louis Riel to return to Saskatchewan. In July, 1884, Riel joined the Métis at Batoche, the Métis' new territorial capital. Following the same strategy as he had used in the Red River uprising, fifteen years before, Riel sent a petition to Ottawa outlining territorial concerns and requesting self-government, federal representation and guaranteed land titles. When the Macdonald government did not respond, the Métis decided to use force to gain their goals. Convinced that he was the "David" who would lead the Métis out of their troubles, Riel established a provisional government in Batoche, in March, 1885.

White settlers, wanting no part in a rebellion, now withdrew their support of the Métis as did the Roman Catholic clergy. Establishing Gabriel Dumont, a skilled Métis buffalo hunter, as his military commander, Riel asked for and received the support of several native tribes. On March 26, 1885, the armed rebellion began when a force of North West Mounted Police clashed with a group of armed Métis, led by Dumont, at Duck Lake. The Métis then destroyed Fort Carlton and emboldened by Métis success, a number of Cree and Blackfoot tribes, led by Big Bear and Poundmaker, attacked Battleford, Frog Lake and Fort Pitt.

The Macdonald government in Ottawa moved swiftly to crush the rebellion. Although the C.P.R. north of Lake Superior was not completed, its general manager, William Van Horne, arranged for Canadian troops from Ontario to be transported across the gaps allowing a force of 3000 to reach Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan by April 10, 1885. Macdonald also appointed British General, Frederick Middleton, to lead the campaign. Despite some initial rebel success in using guerrilla warfare tactics against the Canadian militia, Middleton's force of now almost 5000 troops, quickly squashed the uprising by capturing the Métis capital of Batoche, on May 12, 1885. Riel surrendered on May 15th, while Dumont fled to Montana.

Riel's Trial

Riel's capture now left Prime Minister John A. Macdonald with a major French/English racial division over what punishment the Métis leader should receive for his part in the rebellion. English Canada, especially Ontario, saw Riel as a murderer for the execution of Thomas Scott, in March, 1870, and demanded his execution. French Canada, on the other hand, believed Riel to be a defender of French Canadian rights in the west who had fought unwisely but valiantly for his mistreated Métis people.

Riel was tried for high treason in Regina in the summer of 1885. Although his defense lawyer attempted to have Riel plead not guilty by reason of insanity, he refused and was convicted of the crime of high treason. A storm of protest followed from Quebec and Macdonald appointed a three man medical commission to verify Riel's sanity. By a margin of two to one, the doctors declared Riel to be legally fit. The Prime Minister was now determined to carry out the sentence and Riel was hanged in Regina on November 16, 1885.

Ontario saw Riel's execution as justice served, while Quebec saw Riel as a martyr who had died fighting for French Canadian rights in the west. Macdonald and the Conservatives began to lose support in Quebec, while the Liberals, now led by Wilfrid Laurier, gained. The Saskatchewan Rebellion had also saved the Canadian Pacific Railway. The troops sent west reached the prairies in days versus the months needed after the 1870 Red River uprising. Macdonald quickly pushed a bill through Parliament granting the Canadian Pacific railway the final funds needed to complete the railway. On November 7, 1885, at Craigellachie in the British Columbia Rockies, the last spike was driven by Donald Smith, a mere nine days before Riel's execution.