

LOUIS RIEL AND THE MÉTIS RESISTANCE (1869–1885)

Learning goal: Students will be able to understand the events that led to the Métis resistances in the late 19th century, and the subsequent execution of Louis Riel by the Canadian government.

Suggested timeline: 2 x 75-minute periods

Subjects: Canadian History, Law, Politics, English

Lesson opener

See it:

“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.”

— **John A. MacDonald**

“John A MacDonald breaks the law of the time by inducing rebellion”

— **Wilfred Laurier**

“I am glad the Crown have proved that I am the leader of the half-breeds in the Northwest. I will perhaps be one day acknowledged as more than a leader of the half-breeds, and if I am, I will have an opportunity of being acknowledged as a leader of good in this great country.”

— **Louis Riel**

“The ideals that Louis Riel fought for—ideals of inclusiveness and equality—are now the very same values on which we base our country’s identity.”

— **Justin Trudeau**

“Louis Riel fought for basic human rights. He was a leader not only for the Métis but for all Canadians. With a steadfast commitment to protecting minority rights and the French language, Louis Riel fought for the very values that Canadians hold dear—equality, pluralism, and social justice. His many sacrifices have secured him an enduring place in our shared history as a champion of the Métis people, a founder of Manitoba, and a key contributor to Canadian Confederation.”

— **Carolyn Bennett**

“No one who knows about those times and who has a feeling for the value of humankind and of the land itself could fail, or would think to feel rage and grief about what happened, and about a betrayal on the part of the Canadian government at that time towards the Métis and Indian peoples. The aftermath of that betrayal is with us still...”

— **Margaret Laurence**

The option available to the Métis was to join Canada as a territory, but Louis Riel and the provisional government wanted to join as a province. What are the differences between a province and a territory? What would have been the pros and cons of the Métis joining Confederation? What would be the benefit to the government of Canada in having the Métis join Confederation? How would it have impacted the map of Canada if the Métis would have negotiated, and joined, with United States or France instead of Canada? In the end, the Métis would become involved in an armed resistance at different points against the Canadian government. Although Louis Riel believed in negotiations to avoid violence, speculate why the Métis and the Government would have been at odds so much that they would eventually be involved in violent confrontations. Did Canada honour the foundational promises made to the Métis within the *Manitoba Act, 1870*?

Teacher Cue: These prompt questions could be done in small groups or as a class by brainstorming responses. Leave the answers available for students to see later.

Strategy/Lesson activity

Feel it:

Teacher Cue: CBC Archives has a collection of radio and video broadcasts called Rethinking Riel. cbc.ca/archives/topic/rethinking-riel. You may want to utilize some of these broadcasts as part of additional activities in this lesson plan.

Listen to the first 3:38 minutes of a news report from March 1992: Ottawa declares Louis Riel a founder of Manitoba, cbc.ca/player/play/1725902912. And/or have students read the article called *Prime Minister Justin Trudeau salutes Louis Riel on holiday Monday*, cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/louis-riel-holiday-justin-trudeau-1.3448717.

Have students listen for the following items that are mentioned in the report:

1870—Negotiating Manitoba into Confederation

1885—Northwest Rebellion

Official Recognition for the Métis Nation

Discussion Question

The news report mentioned the Northwest Rebellion. However, Métis Peoples in Canada called it the Northwest Resistance. What is the difference between a rebellion and a resistance? Consider the perspective of both sides.

Know it:

Jigsaw Activity/Individual Research

Using the “WORKSHEET Causes and Effects of Decisions Made: Louis Riel, the Canadian Government and the Métis People,” have students research the ten events listed by providing a very brief description of the event, state what may have caused the event, and what effect it had on future events. If they cannot find a specific effect in their research, have students speculate what the effect could have been.

Online Resources available:

Métis Nation of Ontario

The Canadian Encyclopedia—Métis

Collections Canada

Once the data gathering has been completed, ensure students have a completed chart and discuss some of the causes and effects of the events.

Prompt Questions: Give some examples of some of the things that either the Métis or the government did that would have had a very negative effect on the relationship between the two parties. Why would the Métis have called their actions a “resistance”? Why would the Canadian government have called the Métis “rebels”?

Alternative Activity: Read the Graphic Novel **Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography** by Chester Brown

Students can read this book and complete the activity above. Assessment could occur by completing one of the options below. Teachers should note that the novel is long and will take more than two periods to complete.

Assessment

Do It:

Option One: Time Traveler

You are given the ability to back in time for 24 hours. You are not able to physically change anything, but you are able to have a conversation with someone. The idea is to convince someone to change their decision on something that they did.

Ultimately, you want to get Manitoba into Confederation with Métis involvement and without the bloodshed and stop the execution of Louis Riel. Looking at the cause and effects of the various events that students have reviewed, have them articulate:

- Where and when they would go back in time?
- Who would they talk to?
- What arguments would they use to convince that person/people to change their mind?
- Assuming that they are able to be convincing, what new effect would occur as a result of the change in that person's/people's decision?

This can be articulated in a writing, verbal or other method of your choice.

Option Two: Social Media Account

Have students create a social media account on a Word document (not on a real social media service) of Louis Riel. As an extension, students could opt to select another person related to these events (i.e. Gabriel Dumont, John A. MacDonald, John Christian Schultz).

When building their social media account pages, students should consider the following:

- Who would be their friends/followers on their account?
- What information would be in their personal profile section?
- Create a series of posts that would highlight the events reviewed in this lesson up to the execution of Louis Riel (and beyond if applicable).
- When posting messages, be sure to consider carefully what the person would have been thinking, which can be demonstrated by showing an understanding of the cause and effect relationship of these events.

Extension Activities

1. Who Owned The Land? (Small Group Discussion)

Think About It: If you find a wallet on the sidewalk, is it yours to keep or should you give it back? What if you see a person leave their wallet on a table at a restaurant, and you take it while they are not looking? What is the difference between both of these situations? Who is the owner of the wallet in both of these situations?

From the perspective of Europeans, the land that is now called Canada was “discovered,” even though Indigenous peoples were living here for centuries before. In 1670, King Charles II granted the lands of the Hudson Bay watershed to “the Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson Bay.” The Hudson Bay Company sold Rupert's Land to the Canadian government in 1869. Who had the right to own the land? Who had the right to sell the land?

2. Mental Illness and Addictions

Louis Riel is said to have suffered from mental illness. John A MacDonald is said to have been an alcoholic. Did these two men suffer from the illnesses attributed to them? Support your opinion with fact. Consider how these two men were treated in the press with regard to their alleged illness. How were they treated differently and why? Consider mental illness and addiction in society today. Has the stigma and prejudices associated with mental illness and addiction changed over time? Explain the differences and/or similarities from then to now. Comment on your own reactions and beliefs surrounding mental illness and addiction.

3. Protecting Rights and Resolving Conflict

Think About It: Your family has been living in Canada for many generations. Where you live and how you live is all you know. You are surrounded by family and friends. You have a system of government you know and rights within the community. You find out in the news that a foreign government has ‘purchased’ Canada. A newcomer has told you that many people from that country are planning to relocate to Canada. He mentions that since they will become the majority, they will be deciding the laws of Canada and will send their own government to rule.

In small groups, discuss this scenario using the following questions:

- a. What is the conflict in this situation?
- b. What concerns do you have (e.g. rights, land ownership, language rights, etc)
- c. What steps would you want to take to resolve this conflict?
- d. What steps would you recommend to the foreign government to resolve the conflict?
- e. If the foreign government ignores your concerns, what is your next plan of action?

Note: It is important to always try and understand the various perspectives and priorities that existed during any moment in time/history even if decision makers may not have done so at the time. “WORKSHEET Venn Diagram of Métis Nation and Canadian Government Interests” can be used to complete this task.

As a class, compare your answers. Compare your actions to that of Louis Riel and the Métis during the Red River and Northwest resistances. Do you believe there were other ways for the Canadian government and Louis Riel to handle the situation? Discuss.

Suggested Resources:

Métis Nation of Ontario Website—Culture and Heritage:
www.metisnation.org/culture-heritage/who-are-the-metis

Métis Law in Canada; Teillet, Jean
www.pstlaw.ca/resources/Metis-Law-in-Canada-2013.pdf

The Life of Louis Riel in Pictures
by Dr. Peter Charlebois

The Trial of Louis Riel: Justice and Mercy Denied
by George Goulet

Canada and the Métis, 1869–1885
by D.N. Sprague

Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont
by Joseph Boyden

Riel's People: How the Métis Lived
by Maria Campbell

Unfinished Business in Confederation
mmf.mb.ca/wcm-docs/docs/aga_land_claims_brochure.pdf

The ‘trial’ of Sir John A. Macdonald: Would he be guilty of war crimes today?
cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-trial-of-sir-john-a-macdonald-would-he-be-guilty-of-war-crimes-today-1.4614303

5 things you may not know about Louis Riel from former St. Boniface Museum director
www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/5-things-you-may-not-know-about-louis-riel-from-former-st-boniface-museum-director-1.3449016

Louis Riel: A Canadian Hero
youtube.com/watch?v=ulbgx-7J0w

The Fate of Louis Riel Madman or hero? The trial of the Métis leader
cbc.ca/history/EPISCONTENTSE1EP10CH4PA4LE.html

Library and Archives Canada—Louis Riel:
bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/aboriginal-heritage/metis/Pages/louis-riel.aspx

Manitoba History: The Historiography of Métis Land Dispersal, 1870–1890
mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/30/metislanddispersal.shtml

Why did the 1885 Resistance Happen?
virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/batoche/docs/proof_en_why_did_the_1885_res.pdf

1885 Aftermath; Kurt Boyer
scaa.sk.ca/ourlegacy/exhibit_aftermath

Tudeau can make Louis Riel's dream a reality
thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2015/11/22/trudeau-can-make-louis-riels-dream-a-reality.html

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau salutes Louis Riel on holiday Monday
cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/louis-riel-holiday-justin-trudeau-1.3448717

Exoneration for Louis Riel: Mercy, Justice or Political Expediency?; Jean Teillet
scribd.com/document/340004788/Exoneration-for-Louis-Riel-Justice-Mercy-or-Political-Expediency

The 'Murder' of Thomas Scott
faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/QuebecHistory/readings/TheMurderofThomasScott.html

Métis—The Canadian Encyclopedia: thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/metis

CBC Archives—Rethinking Riel: cbc.ca/archives/topic/rethinking-riel

Louis Riel—A Comic-Strip Biography
by Chester Brown

The North-West is Our Mother
by Jean Teillet