

LOUIS RIEL AND THE RED RIVER COLONY

Online Resource



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A Summary of the Script

Louis Riel and the Red River Colony tells the story of Louis Riel's role in leading the Red River Colony into Confederation in 1870 as the new province of Manitoba. A reporter for the Exploring Canadian History program journeys back to the Red River Colony and Ottawa in 1869-70 to find out about the story behind these historical events. When surveyors for the Canadian government started dividing up Métis land for future settlement, Louis Riel, a 25-year-old Métis, led the resistance. Along with French and English representatives from the colony, he presented a "List of Rights" to the Canadian government. Although Prime Minister John A. Macdonald and Secretary of State for the Provinces Joseph Howe saw potential problems when Riel ordered the execution of Thomas Scott, a 28-year-old English speaking labourer, they moved forward with the negotiations. On July 15th, 1870, Manitoba became a province of Canada.

Settlement of the Canadian West

At the time of Confederation (1867), there were four provinces: Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald realized that expanding to the Canadian West was very important in creating a prosperous Canada. Without British Columbia as a province, Canada would have no outlet to the Pacific Ocean. American settlers were moving to the Canadian West. In order to prevent the United States from taking over these lands, Macdonald negotiated the purchase of the Hudson's Bay Company lands for \$1.5 million. The official transfer date was to be December 1, 1869. However, no one had consulted the people in the Red River region.

Who were the peoples of the Red River? Aboriginal peoples lived in the vast territory. The largest group of people was the Métis who were descendents of French and English fur traders and Indian mothers. They were excellent buffalo hunters who also farmed small plots of land and transported goods for the fur traders. As the colony grew, settlers continued to arrive from Europe, America and Eastern Canada. By the 1860's, there were twelve thousand settlers in the Red River Colony.

When crews of surveyors sent by the Canadian government started preparing the land of the Red River Colony for settlement, the Métis were very concerned. On October 11, 1869, on a farm outside Upper Fort Garry, Louis Riel with a group of Métis people confronted the surveyors. Riel, a 25-year-old Métis, and his followers took over Up-

per Fort Garry without resistance, and set up a provisional government. The Canadian government saw this as an unlawful act. Born in St. Boniface, Riel had studied in Montreal and had returned to his Métis homeland in 1868. Since he spoke both French and English, he was a good choice to head the provisional government. He called a convention of forty representatives of the settlement, equally divided between English speaking and French speaking colonists. They drew up a Bill of Rights and sent it to Ottawa.

However, not everyone in the Red River Colony supported Louis Riel's provisional government. A small group of settlers from Ontario called the Canada Party believed English Protestants should control the area. When a group of them took up arms against the provisional government, they were imprisoned. Thomas Scott, a 28-year-old labourer from Ontario, even threatened to kill Riel at one point. Riel saw this as an act of treason against his government, and Thomas Scott was executed on March 4, 1870. People in Ontario wanted revenge—some demanded Riel's execution. However, many people in Quebec supported Riel and his government.

In an attempt to find a solution, Prime Minister Macdonald met with Red River representatives and agreed to most of the terms of the Bill of Rights set forth by the provisional government. The Manitoba Act created the province of Manitoba on July 15, 1870 and provided:

- four members from Manitoba in the House of Commons and two in the Senate,
- a provincial government under local control using both French and English languages,
- denominational schools with instruction in both French and English,
- and land for the Métis.

Although Riel was pleased with the new status of the Red River Colony as the province of Manitoba, he feared that he would be punished for the death of Thomas Scott. As a result, he fled to the United States where he remained for almost fifteen years. His followers elected him twice to the House of Commons in Ottawa – even though he lived in another country! On September 26, 2007, the Manitoba legislature passed a bill establishing a statutory holiday on the third Monday in February as Louis Riel Day, the same day some Canadian provinces now celebrate Family Day. The first Louis Riel Day was celebrated on February 18, 2008.

Activities Before Reading

1. The province of Manitoba celebrates Louis Riel Day in February. Ask students if they know why Louis Riel has been honoured in this way. What other holidays do students know about in Canada (or in other countries) which celebrate important people? Ask students to create a list of criteria for a new Canadian holiday honouring a famous Canadian. Have them select an individual and write nominations based on the listed criteria. Create a bulletin board display showing all the nominations.

2. Read through the list of characters with your students. Who are Stephanie and Natalie? Which characters are members of Canada's government? Have students discuss what these people might be like.

3. Show students a map of Canada in 1871.
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Canada_provinces_1871-1873.png)

Locate the places mentioned in this script: Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Red River, Manitoba, British Columbia, United States, Alaska, Ottawa, and Upper Fort Garry. What challenges did Canada face as a growing country? Create a timeline indicating when each province on the map of Canada in 1871 joined Confederation.

4. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald tells Secretary of State for the Provinces Joseph Howe, "Let us move forward with the negotiations. Hopefully, we can have a new province of Manitoba by this summer." Why was Macdonald so determined to make Manitoba a province? Why would having more settlers in the Red River Colony help Canada develop into a stronger country? Why would Aboriginal peoples be concerned about the arrival of these settlers? Divide the class up into four groups to represent the major stakeholders in the Red River Colony in 1869: Canadian government, Red River settlers from Ontario, Aboriginal peoples, and American settlers. Ask each group to describe what they want for the future of the colony. Have a class discussion comparing these perspectives.

5. Using the website suggestions provided below, have students work in pairs or in groups to list ten facts about Louis Riel and the Red River Colony. Write a paragraph incorporating all ten facts.

Extending the Experience

1. Pretend that you are one of the colonists in this script. Write a diary entry about the events at the Red River Colony, perhaps including your reaction to those events.

2. Create a historical trading card for Louis Riel or Sir John A. Macdonald. The photograph on one side could be a drawing or an actual photograph. The text on the other side should include: date and place of birth, date and place of death, significant events and major achievements.

3. In a small group or with your class, discuss or debate the following statement: "Louis Riel is a Canadian hero."

4. Draw an event web to illustrate the events in this script.

5. Manitoba became the fifth Canadian province in 1870. Choose

one of the five provinces or territories which joined Confederation since 1870. Research the major historical figures and events which led to this area becoming part of Canada. Present your information in a newspaper or magazine article, a podcast, on a website, or as a powerpoint presentation.

Tips for Voice and Expression

| Character | Reading Level | Description |
|-------------------|---------------|--|
| Stephanie | moderate | Stephanie is the host of the fictional program <i>Exploring Canadian History</i> on the History Time-Travel Network. |
| Natalie | challenging | Natalie is a reporter for <i>Exploring Canadian History</i> on the History Time-Travel Network. She explores the events at the Red River Colony in 1869 which led to the creation of the province of Manitoba in 1870. |
| Surveyor #1 | easy | As a representative of the Canadian government, he was sent to the Red River Colony to prepare the land for future settlement. He had little respect for the Métis people who inhabited the land. |
| Surveyor #2 | easy | As a representative of the Canadian government, he was also sent to the Red River Colony to prepare the land for future settlement. He also had little respect for the Métis people who inhabited the land. |
| Louis Riel | challenging | Riel was a 25-year-old Métis who was born in St. Boniface. He had studied in Montreal and returned to his Métis homeland in 1868. Since he spoke both French and English, he was a good choice to head the provisional government in the negotiations. He was a fervent believer in guaranteeing the rights of the Métis people. |
| Colonist #1 | easy | As one of the settlers of the Red River Colony, this was one of the people concerned about the actions of the Canadian government and Riel's response. |
| Colonist #2 | easy | As another settler of the Red River Colony, this was also a person concerned about the actions of the Canadian government and Riel's response. |
| John A. Macdonald | moderate | He was the first prime minister of Canada. He was determined to build a strong Canada by promoting expansion to the Canadian West. |
| Joseph Howe | moderate | Secretary of State for the Provinces Joseph Howe was responsible for managing provincial concerns. He advised Macdonald about Louis Riel and the events at the Red River Colony in 1869. |

Books of Interest

Blood Upon Our Land – The North West Resistance Diary of Josephine Bouvier

by Maxine Trottier (Scholastic Canada 2009)

Famous Dead Canadians 2 (“Louis Riel Puts his Foot Down”)

by Joanne Stanbridge (Scholastic Canada 2006)

Louis Riel

by Sharon Stewart (XYZ Publishing 2007)

Louis Riel: A Comic Strip Biography

by Chester Brown (Drawn and Quarterly Publications 2004)

Louis Riel (Remarkable Canadians Series)

by Carol Koopmans (Weigl 2009)

The Secret of Your Name

by David Bouchard (Red Deer Press 2009)

Websites of Interest

Canada in the Making – The Riel Rebellions

http://www.canadiana.org/citm/specifique/rielreb_e.html

Library and Archives Canada – Confederation for Kids – Louis Riel

<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/confederation/kids/023002-3090-e.html>

Manitoba Historical Society – Red River Resistance

http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/29/redriverresistance.shtml

Métis Nation of Ontario – Louis Riel

<http://www.metisnation.org/culture/Riel/home.html>

Province of Manitoba - Culture, Heritage and Tourism – Louis Riel Day

http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/louis_riel/index.html