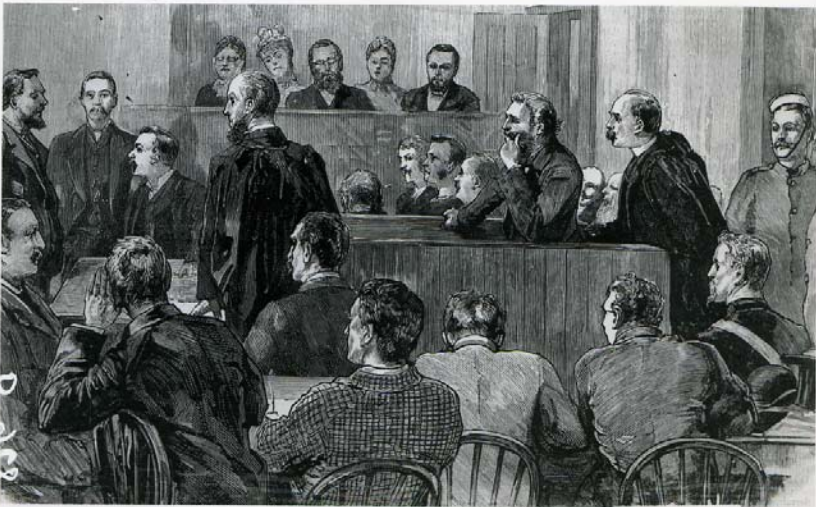


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Charles Nolin testifying at Riel's trial. Original engraving appeared in *The Graphic* (London, England), 12 September 1885. Saskatchewan Archives Board, Photograph Collection, S-B7661.

1885 – Aftermath

Kurt Boyer

Introduction

With the Métis defeated at the Battle of Batoche, the North-West Resistance had effectively ended. For Riel and others directly involved in the conflict, consequences were swift and direct. In the months following however, it became quite clear that the Resistance's aftermath was felt throughout Canada, particularly in communities not directly involved in the conflict. The more enduring and severe consequences were felt by the Métis and First Nation communities, who in the wake of losing the struggle for rights, had to continue living amidst the expanding Canadian state, and increasing hostilities against their people.

In examining the aftermath of the North-West Resistance of 1885, consequences from the conflict can be classified into two broad categories: consequences for individuals who played a major role in the Resistance (i.e.: Louis Riel, Big Bear); and consequences of a thematic nature (i.e.: impacts on French-English relations in Canada, race relations in Saskatchewan).

Aftermath: Métis Leaders and Allies - Louis Riel

In the final moments at Batoche, Riel retreated into the surrounding forest to pray. He had secured the safety of his own family, and after choosing not to flee, accepted calls for his surrender. As he gave himself up to Canadian troops, Riel maintained his actions were in fulfilment to his duty to God,

his council, and his people. Riel was arrested and taken to Regina for trial on charges of high treason.

The trial of Louis Riel has been the subject of much scrutiny since it handed down a conviction and death sentence to the Métis leader. The particulars of Riel's trial are highly suspect with regard to a free and fair judicial process.

The trial site and jury were not selected for their objective qualities. The trial was held in Regina, and the jury was made up entirely of Protestant Anglo-Saxons. Many claim that both the city and those making up the jury were antagonistic to the French-speaking, Catholic, and Métis cause.

Riel's crown appointed lawyers were highly incompetent. At the onset of the trial, they had the judge bar Riel from speaking because he opposed their attempt to establish a plea of insanity. In their closing arguments Riel's defence gave a brief history of the Métis' grievances but also praised the bravery of the volunteers who willingly took up arms to help put down the Métis Resistance. When Riel was finally allowed to address the jury, he vehemently opposed a defence based on the argument of insanity and attempted to convince the jury otherwise. As he addressed the court, Riel's mention of insanity aimed to assuage any misgivings the Protestant jury might have regarding his Catholic faith:

As to religion, what is my belief? What is my insanity about that? My insanity, your Honors, gentlemen of the jury, is that I wish to leave Rome aside, inasmuch as it is the cause of division between Catholics and Protestants. ...I did not wish to force my views, because in Batoche to the half-breeds that followed me I used the word, *carte blanche*. If I have any

influence in the new world it is to help in that way and even if it takes 200 years to become practical, then after my death that will bring out practical results, and then my children's children will shake hands with the Protestants of the new world in a friendly manner. I do not wish these evils which exist in Europe to be continued, as much as I can influence it, among the half-breeds. I do not wish that to be repeated in America. That work is not the work of some days or some years, it is the work of hundreds of years.¹

When the jury returned from deliberation, a guilty verdict was pronounced with a recommendation for mercy. One juror later wrote to Parliament commenting on reasons for the jury recommending mercy: "Had the Government done their duty and redressed the grievances of the half-breeds of Saskatchewan...there would never have been a second Riel Rebellion, and consequently no prisoner to try and condemn."² Despite this recommendation, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald's determination to see Riel hang came to fruition, and the Métis leader's execution day was set for the 18th of September. In the hours just prior to his execution, Riel wrote one final letter to his mother, and at 8:00 am; he was hanged until pronounced dead. Riel's body is buried at St. Boniface Cathedral's churchyard. The Canadian government buried the founder of the Province of Manitoba and a defender of Métis rights.

Gabriel Dumont

Unlike Riel who had given himself up voluntarily, Dumont, when assured by Middleton that his surrender would guarantee

him a fair trial, replied: “You tell Middleton...that I am in the woods, and that I still have 90 cartridges to use on his men.”³

Hearing that Riel had given himself up, Dumont helped ensure that the women and children were led to safety, then fled to Montana with Michel Dumas. Upon arrival, he and Dumas were arrested by American authorities, and then promptly released by order of President Cleveland.

Dumont lived briefly in the Métis settlement of Spring Creek, where he was soon followed by his wife, who informed him that his home had been looted and burned by the Canadian army.

After his wife passed away, Dumont accepted a position in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show and toured as the “Hero of the Half Breed Rebellion.” Following the news that the Canadian government had proclaimed an amnesty, Dumont returned north and settled near Batoche where he lived the rest of his days hunting and trapping.

First Nation Participants and Accidental Allies

With the Resistance over, and the Canadian government looking to consolidate its authority in Saskatchewan, it arrested and tried the members of the First-Nations it believed were guilty of ‘treason.’ The trials of Riel’s ‘accomplices’ such as Big Bear and One Arrow are typical examples of the irrelevancy, and cultural inappropriateness, of western conceptions of legality and the imprudence in which they were applied to the actions of Aboriginal peoples.

Prior to the Resistance, detailed and lengthy legal documents known as treaties had drawn up where the First Nations sold their lands to the Canadian government. The treaty making

process deteriorated into land theft and starvation for the First Nations people, and for many, their participation in the North-West Resistance was born out of this fact. Following the Battle of Batoche, dozens of Indian warriors and Métis leaders were tried on various charges. Chief One Arrow of Saskatchewan was charged with treason:

Together with divers and other evil disposed persons...armed and arrayed in a warlike manner, that is to say with guns, rifles, pistols, bayonets and other weapons, being then wickedly and feloniously assembled and gathered together against our said Lady the Queen, her Crown and dignity.⁴

The indictment was translated into the Cree language and Chief One Arrow heard that he had “knocked off the Queen’s bonnet and stabbed her in the behind with his sword.” Chief One Arrow was enraged and demanded to know if the interpreter was drunk as he had never met the Queen.

Literal translation was the common practice in all of the trials of the North-West Resistance. Chief Big Bear denied his treason charges and stated; “these people all lie. They are saying that I tried to steal the Great Mother’s hat, how could I do that? She lives across the Great Water and how could I go there to steal her hat? I didn’t want her hat, and didn’t know she had one.”⁵

The Canadian law of treason had no meaning for the Cree people and it could not be translated. Even if it had of been adequately translated, the law of treason can only punish those who owe allegiance to the Crown and who intentionally turn against it. The whole offence was foreign to the warriors who were tried and the charges were impossible to defend.

The justice rendered in these trials was a travesty.

Big Bear, One Arrow, along with Poundmaker were all convicted of treason and were imprisoned in the Stony Mountain Penitentiary. Here their condition deteriorated rapidly and all three men died shortly upon being released due to poor health.

Placation of Dissent among Manitoban Settlers

While much of the current literature on the aftermath of the 1885 Resistance tends to focus on more national issues, the aftermath of the Resistance had one very distinct regional impact. In many ways, the North-West Resistance placated a growing dissatisfaction Manitobans were feeling towards eastern Canada. If left to fester, this dissatisfaction could have had dire consequences for the Dominion. Instead discontent was replaced with a vehemence directed not at the central government, but at the Métis who at the time shared numerous concerns with the Manitobans.

During the years leading up to Batoche, western Manitoba (defined as the area west of Portage La Prairie to the Saskatchewan border, and between the Canada - United States boundary and Riding Mountain) was in the midst of initial settlement. The new province was still coming to grips with the mercantilist relationship eastern Canada had with the west.

Most of these Manitobans were land-poor Ontarians who had come following a successful campaign by Central Canadian promoters encouraging expansion, claiming that better livelihoods could be had in western agriculture. Approximately forty thousand came to Manitoba between 1876 and 1881. This mass immigration came following the exodus

of Métis, who after successfully negotiating the *Manitoba Act* of 1870, had been systematically marginalised from land and livelihood, and forced to find life further west.

By the 1880s the Métis of Saskatchewan and the new immigrant farmers from Ontario shared numerous concerns that were largely ignored by Ottawa. Both groups began to suffer under the imbalanced relationship central Canada had been employing in its dealings with the west. Manitoban farmers began to protest the unequal transportation and tariff system which had brought disproportionate benefits to eastern Canadians. These concerns led the Manitobans to establish the Farmers' Protective Union in 1883. The union protested the Canadian Pacific Railway's monopoly, the tariff system, and also argued for the need to gain provincial control over the land and resources. Manitoban farmers shared a number of common grievances with the Métis which included: the slow pace of railway construction; the high transportation costs; the country's protective tariff structure; and the second-class constitutional status of Manitoba and North-West Territories (the area now known as Saskatchewan). Like the Métis, western settler communities developed an intense resentment for the limited attention given to their area by the national government. Both the Métis and the settlers were experiencing hardships from a life in a 'hinterland.'

In addition to relief from the material hardships shared with the western settlers, the Métis also hoped to gain provisions which would protect their culture, language, religion, and way of life. The settlers on the other hand, being mostly white, Protestant, and English speaking, were more aligned with the values of the Anglo-Saxon majority in Ottawa. When conflict in Saskatchewan broke out, it was these differences which ultimately marginalised any similarity between the groups'

struggles, and precluded any future cooperation between the two.

The Métis that were involved in the Duck Lake skirmish transformed a budding support for Métis hardship, into a more profound ethnic or racial issue. Deeply held racial hostilities towards Métis and other Aboriginal peoples began to turn commonalities into differences. The increasing alienation felt by western settler communities was replaced by a movement of Canadian nationalism. This nationalism was based on the perceived common ‘threat’ of Métis, and Indian armed insurgency.

It could be argued that the North-West Resistance quelled a growing movement of dissatisfaction which western whites began to voice in opposition to the administration in central Canada. If this growing movement was allowed to fester, the political consequences could have been disastrous for the Dominion of Canada, which at the time was still trying to establish its sovereignty over the west.

Impacts of French-English Relations in Central Canada

Another consequence of the North-West Resistance, or more specifically to the hanging of Riel, was the resulting uproar in French Canada. The Resistance and hanging of Riel rekindled and fuelled Anglo-French tensions in Quebec. The hanging itself resulted in an immediate protest of six thousand in the streets of Montreal. A few weeks later however a more organised rally attracted fifty-thousand protesters, and was held on the Champ de Mars in Montreal on the 23rd of November. One of the speakers at the protest was Wilfrid Laurier, who until the protest had not attracted much attention. It has been argued that Laurier’s moving speech at the Champ de Mars meeting was one of the first steps in galvanizing a political

base which he continued to build until becoming Canada's seventh, and first francophone, prime minister.

Apart from the protests providing Laurier a sturdy political platform, it also provided the Liberal party of Quebec a monumental flashpoint to establish, and then build on its support base. Honoré Mercier, the leader of the Parti National (now the Liberal Party), was strongly opposed to the execution of Riel and to the Conservative government which had held power in Quebec for decades. The public outcry in Quebec over Riel's execution allowed Mercier and the Liberal party to gain support. In 1886, they won the Quebec provincial election. This was the first time the Liberal party had ever held a majority government in Quebec.

While the Liberal party's rise to power was briefly cut short by scandal the following year, the party began a slow process which gradually resulted in breaking the Conservative stronghold in Quebec. The 1896 Liberal landslide victory marked a new era of politics in Quebec. Actions taken by Macdonald's Conservative government during the Resistance and Riel's execution had enraged the French-Catholic province of Quebec, and eventually led to the dominance of the Liberal party. For many years following Resistance, the Conservative party became "le parti des Anglais" (the party of the English).

The hanging of Riel made a big impact on Quebec politics, and is still an important issue in French-Anglo relations in Canada. It is important to note that while Quebecers denounced the hanging of Riel, the issues which Riel and the Resistance fought for were distinct from those perceived and adopted by French Canadians. The Métis Resistance materialised from a struggle to preserve Métis culture, which is distinct from French-Canadian culture. Arguably, connections between the North-West Resistance and changes to Quebec's political

context were an appropriation of Métis struggle to support French nationalism. Contemporary French-Canadian interpretations of the Métis Resistance tend to reduce events to feed discourse surrounding French-English relations. To some even today, Riel's hanging can be reduced to meaning: "a supreme act of cruelty against one whose only sin was to have stood up for the rights of his people (i.e. the rights of French Catholics), as a symbol that Canada was not a land of equality between French and English Canadians but one where the French Canadians were a minority whose views and feelings could be disregarded."⁶

The Rational for the Railway

The impact the 1885 Resistance had on the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway has been well documented. In 1885, Prime Minister Macdonald had first proposed the railway as a way to secure the west for Canada, and protect it from American annexation. The construction of the railway was given government subsidies, exemption from taxation, and other provisions. Despite these provisions, the project was plagued by financial difficulties, and needed to be saved from bankruptcy on numerous occasions. With the outbreak of the 1885 North-West Resistance, an opportunity to gain the enormous funds needed to finish the railway was created.

William Cornelius Van Horne, who was in charge of overseeing the completion of the line at the time, seized the opportunity. As fear of another possible Red River incident in Saskatchewan began to fester in Ottawa, Van Horne lobbied the government for additional funds on the basis that the railway could provide the government's army quick transportation to attack the Métis.

The government accepted the proposition, and used the line to transport its troops across the west. Following the Resistance, the government re-organized the CPR's debt and provided it the additional funds it desperately needed. The railroad was completed in November 1885; just seven months after the first shots of the Resistance were fired.

The Marginalisation of Métis and First Nations

The most pronounced impacts following the 1885 Resistance were felt in Saskatchewan, with the Métis and some First Nations groups experiencing the worst of it. Following the conflict, race became a determining factor in how those living in Saskatchewan began to be treated. While Euro-Canadians (both English and French speaking) were barricaded in towns and forts during the Resistance, they were soon in a position which afforded them privilege over the Métis and other Aboriginal peoples of Saskatchewan. While the property and homes of Euro-Canadian settlers was protected by the Canadian government, whereas Métis homes and property were destroyed and looted by the military and volunteers following the battle. The Resistance did however cause more harm than just theft and destruction of Métis property; it marked an era of systematic marginalisation of Métis and First Nation people in Saskatchewan.

For First Nations, many who were not a part of the conflict became 'accidental rebels,' or falsely tied to the conflict. The Resistance became another justification to fear Aboriginals, and remove them from any greater societal benefits offered to Euro-Canadians. Poundmaker remarked that after the uprising "[being] Indian was like being in a cage ... There was no freedom for an Indian."⁷ Poundmaker was also referring to how this marginalisation had become not only social, but with the arrival of the pass system,⁸ became physical as well.

While the situation of systematic marginalisation of First Nations people was a national issue, in Saskatchewan the Resistance became a flash point that further increased the isolation of First Nations from Canadian society and further entrenched the destructive paternal relationship.

The Battleford Hangings of 1885 give an explicit example of this destructive paternalism. As a reminder of the consequences to those who do not respect the authority of the government, First Nations children were brought from the residential school in Battleford to witness the execution of eight First Nation ‘traitors’ who allegedly participated in the Resistance.

After the hangings the bodies were buried in a mass grave.

Aftermath: Métis

With Riel executed, Dumont exiled, and most other leaders serving prison sentences, the Métis of Saskatchewan fell on very difficult times. Much as they had been following the signing of the *Manitoba Act*, many of the Métis in Saskatchewan were dispersed after the Resistance. Those who stayed and who were considered by the government to be non-participants in the Métis Resistance were given ‘scrip,’ which were land or monetary allotments valued at \$160 to \$240.

The scrip system was a systemic failure. Many of these Métis never received their scrip. Most of the scrip notes did not state the intended beneficiary’s name, and ultimately resulted in many disappearing before reaching the intended owner. Other Métis families did not have the money to invest in the farming equipment needed to make use of land, and thus sold their scrip.

Scrip was often sold to unscrupulous capitalists who followed the Treaty No. 8 Half-Breed Commission to northern Saskatchewan and offered payments of between \$70 and \$130 to Métis for their scrip. Over 90 percent of scrip issued to Métis ended up in the hands of bankers, lawyers, speculators, and financial institutions. Great wealth was generated from the dispossession of Métis from their lands. This dispossession continued following the scrip fiasco, with many Métis forced to become squatters, and living on land called the 'road allowance.' As more displaced Métis joined together on the side of these roads, small shanty communities built of discarded lumber or logs began to spring up, creating term "The Road Allowance People."

More and more settlers flooded into the prairies, just as they did after Red River. Meanwhile, the Métis' societal marginalisation increased. Because the Métis were not land owners or tax payers, their children were denied basic access to public school. Some Métis children managed to enter into reserve schools; some were accepted into separate Catholic institutions. But before Métis children were admitted to Catholic schools, the recent 'sins' committed by participating in the Resistance needed to be paid for, literally. Edgar Dewdney, the Indian Commissioner for the Northwest Territories at the time explained in a letter: "It is said that the half-breeds have been selling cattle lately to make up the money for required by the priest before he will re-admit the backsliders to the privileges of the church; \$25.00 a man is the figure."⁹

It wasn't until the 1930s and 1940s that the government attempted to address the social, economic, and political marginalization of the Métis people on the prairies. Most government attempts like the experimental farms instituted by the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) were

paternalistic failures, providing the Métis few tools to increase self-determination. Real progressive initiatives instead originated from Métis leaders like Malcom Norris, James Brady, and Peter Tomkins who, by fighting to have Métis concerns brought to the mainstream political agenda, realised such legislation like *The Métis Betterment Act* in 1938.

Conclusion

Impacts from the North-West Resistance were felt throughout Canada and linger on to this day. The influences from the Resistance were multifaceted and served multiple interests. The Resistance provided a rationale to finish the railway, served as a political tool in Quebec, and materialised as a “common enemy” to placate settler dissent in Manitoba. The most severe and long lasting effects were felt by the generations of Métis and First Nations in Saskatchewan who, following the Resistance, were subject to increased processes of marginalisation, which still permeate in Saskatchewan.

Endnotes

¹ Louis Riel, "Final Statement of Louis Riel," University of Missouri-Kansas City Law School,
<<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/riel/rieltrialstatement.html>>

² Douglas Linder, "The Trial of Louis Riel,"
<<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/riel/rielaccount.html>>

³ George Stanley, "Gabriel Dumont's Account of the North-West Rebellion 1885," *Canadian Historical Review* 30 (1949). 259 as quoted in Joanne Pelletier, *The North-West Resistance of 1885* (Regina: Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research, 1985).

⁴ S. Haring, *White Man's Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 40.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Stewart Wallace, "The North-West Rebellion,"
<<http://faculty.marianopolis.edu/c.belanger/quebechistory/encyclopedia/North-WestRebellion-CanadianHistory.htm>>

⁷ First Nations University of Canada Archives, 1885 Resistance Project, Clarence Swimmer interview, Poundmaker reserve, 11 June 1993, as quoted in Erin Millions, "Ties Undone: A Gendered and Racial Analysis of the Impact of the 1885 Northwest Rebellion in the Saskatchewan District" (Master's thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2004), 114.

⁸ The pass system when instituted in early 1886, created an oppressive regulatory system to govern the movement of all First Nations persons. Within this system, a person was unable to leave the reserve unless in possession of a pass. This pass stated where he or she was going, what the purpose of leaving the reserve was, and the duration of the leave. Originally proposed for only the "Rebel Indians", Macdonald, insisted that the system should be applied to all First Nations.

⁹ Dewdney Papers, Vol. 21B, L.M. Herchermer to E. Dewdney, 15 January 15 1886, 9045-8 as quoted in Pelletier, *The North-West Resistance of 1885*, 36.