

CHAPTER TWO: THE RIEL REBELLIONS

Confederation and Canada's Westward Expansion

In 1867, the British North America Act created the Dominion of Canada. The British government maintained control of Canada's foreign policy, but in all other respects Canada was an autonomous nation. There were several reasons for the British to minimize their involvement in their North American colonies.

The expansion of the British Empire had increased the need for Britain to maintain a stronger military presence in Asia and Africa, and the BNA act would effectively make Canada responsible for its own defence, decreasing the need for a strong British military commitment. Obviously, the sovereignty of British North America could best be maintained if the colonies were united under a single government.

Another factor was the attitude of the Americans toward British North America. The United States felt, not without reason, that British sympathies during the American Civil War had been with the Confederates. The victorious Union had a large well-equipped army, and it was feared that the Americans might now turn their attention toward the British colonies to the north. The fact that the Americans had already waged an aggressive war to seize territory from Mexico less than twenty years before certainly did much to justify that fear. The American purchase of Alaska from

Russia in 1867 only deepened British and Canadian suspicions about the territorial ambitions of the United States.

Fortunately for Canada, America's attention was focused upon economic issues. There was the formidable task of Reconstruction after the Civil War and a great deal of energy was devoted to railway construction. Although there were Americans who were active in the Canadian Northwest and campaigned for annexation, there was no consistent support for them in Washington.

The United States Army was assigned the task of "pacifying" the First Nations in the west. The native peoples in the American West proved to be formidable opponents, but they simply did not have the men or resources to successfully defend their territories. They fought with the ferocity of desperation, but were overwhelmed by the American superiority in men and *matériel*.

An aggressive stance by Canada was necessary to ensure that the prairies and Pacific west did not become American territory. Prime Minister John A. Macdonald pursued a policy aimed at securing the Northwest Territories for Canada. In 1869, the Hudson's Bay Company gave up its Rupert's Land Charter and trading monopoly in return for £ 300 000, 45 000 acres of land adjacent to its trading posts and addi-

tional lands to be determined at a later date.¹ The Northwest would revert to the Crown until such time as Canada was prepared to assume possession. This was scheduled to occur on 1 December 1869. In Ontario and Quebec, the west was seen as an area with a great potential for agricultural expansion and as a source of raw materials for the growing industries in central Canada.

“Rebellion” in Red River

In 1869, the non-native population of the Northwest was approximately seven thousand, with the majority living in the vicinity of Fort Garry. It was composed of Métis, mixed-bloods,² white farmers (descendants of the Selkirk settlers) and a small group of Americans and Canadians. The Métis and mixed-bloods were by far the largest and most educated group, holding many of the important posts in Fort Garry including sheriff, postmaster, medical officer, magistrates and all but one of the teachers in the community. The proprietors of the only newspaper in the Northwest were also Métis and mixed-bloods.

The Canadians in Fort Garry were recent arrivals. This group of merchants, land speculators and journalists created much dissension in the Red River settlement. Under the leadership of Dr. J.C. Schulz, these “Canada Firsters”

¹ With the selection of additional lands, the Hudson’s Bay Company would eventually control one-twentieth of the land in the Northwest.

² Métis refers to those of French and native ancestry, while the term mixed-blood is used for those of English/Scottish and native ancestry. The Métis were Francophone and Roman Catholic, and had developed a society quite distinct from both the European and Native cultures.

hinted that the *status quo* as it existed in the Northwest would certainly change under Canadian administration. They had ambitious plans for the socio-economic restructuring of the Red River settlement in which they expected to make a handsome profit. This attitude created hostility among the original inhabitants of Red River. This hostility towards the Canadians was further intensified by the Canadians’ thinly veiled contempt for the “half-breeds” who were the majority at Fort Garry.

The posture of Schulz’s group was reinforced by the activities of the Dominion surveyors, dispatched to the area in the summer of 1869. They began a land survey that clearly ignored the farms already present. The inhabitants of the Red River colony had no reason to believe that their land title would be recognized by the new Canadian administration. They had a very real fear that they would lose the lands they had worked for three generations.

There had already been serious apprehension in the colony about the transfer of jurisdiction to the Canadian government because none of the parties involved, the Hudson’s Bay Company, the British government or the Canadian government had had any prior consultation with the people in the Red River settlement. The activities of Schulz’s group and the Dominion surveyors served to increase the fears of the local population. The settlers prepared for serious resistance. Louis Riel emerged as the leader of a full-fledged “rebellion.” He and his supporters took control of Fort Garry and the arsenal of weapons in it. Riel enjoyed the support of all the inhabitants of the Red River settlement.

Prime Minister Macdonald made the mistake of sending the new governor, William

Profiles: Canadian Mounted Officers

Colonel Acheson Irvine: Colonel Irvine was Assistant Commissioner for The Northwest Mounted Police, and succeeded Colonel Macleod as Commissioner in the Northwest Territories in 1880. As early as 1883, he had warned the government that there was unrest amongst the Cree due to poor hunting and the government's failure to honour its treaty obligations. Prime Minister Macdonald dismissed Irvine's concerns as unwarranted.

When hostilities commenced, Irvine led a column of mounted police north to reinforce Battleford. The spring conditions were severe, and Irvine's march was a remarkable achievement. However, both he and Crozier were criticized for their apparent inactivity during the rebellion. Irvine's first priority had been ensuring the safety of the non-native population, and he did not feel he had the resources to protect the settlers and mount military operations against the Métis.

Despite his repeated warnings of unrest, the federal government ultimately blamed him for the outbreak of hostilities, and he was dismissed from his position in the summer of 1885.

Colonel Crozier: Crozier was superintendent for the area that included Battleford and Fort Carleton. He did not have a sufficient number of policemen to secure the area, and his force at Duck Lake was composed of Northwest Mounted policemen and several civilian volunteers. In the confrontation with Dumont, his force suffered

twenty-three casualties, twelve killed and eleven wounded. He was able to withdraw without further casualties because Riel prevented Dumont from pursuing Crozier's men. Like Irvine, Crozier would later be criticized for his failure to mount offensive operations against the Métis and their Cree allies.

Colonel Sam Steele: Colonel Steele was legendary for his fearless actions in maintaining law and order, and commanded great respect among both settlers and natives. Unlike Irvine and Crozier, he was not burdened with the responsibility of protecting civilians, and played an energetic role as the commander of the mounted force attached to General Strange's contingent. Steele would later play a dominant role in establishing law and order in the Klondike.

Major Charles Boulton: Boulton was a Canadian who had seen extensive service with the British Army. He was an experienced cavalry officer. At Fish Creek, he had refused to follow the Métis horsemen because he recognized that Dumont was attempting to lure his troopers into an ambush. His actions prevented Middleton from losing his most experienced and mobile units.

McDougall, to take over the colony before the negotiated date of the official transfer of power to the Canadian government. Riel sent a detachment of armed Métis to prevent McDougall's entry into the area. Once this had been done, Riel and his supporters summoned a convention in which a list of rights was agreed to and a Provisional government was elected to negotiate with the government of Canada on the basis of these rights.

In February of 1870, the Canadians in the colony attempted to overthrow the Provisional government by force. It failed and the majority fled, while forty-eight were taken prisoner and detained. It was after this that Riel took an action that would have serious consequences for both himself and French-English relations in central Canada.

Thomas Scott, one of those captured in the February confrontation, was an Orangeman from Ontario. It is difficult to determine who Thomas Scott hated most: Catholics, Francophones or "half-breeds." However, for Scott, the Métis in general and Riel in particular embodied all that he detested. While he represented no danger to the Provisional government after his incarceration, his constant display of arrogant contempt for his captors eventually provoked an extreme response from them. Riel, determined to make an example of Scott, had the provisional government put him on trial for treason. Scott was found guilty and executed.

The event sparked a violent controversy in central Canada. In Ontario, both the Liberal and Conservative parties called for the mounting of a military expedition and the arrest of Scott's "murderer." Québécois, on the other hand, viewed Riel as a brave defender of

French and Catholic rights and Scott as an agent of English-Canadian expansionism.

Prime Minister Macdonald attempted to placate both. He agreed to receive a delegation from the Provisional government in order to negotiate the terms in which the Red River colony would enter into Confederation. At the same time, he authorized a military expedition composed of British regulars and Canadian militia to Fort Garry. This expedition not only appeased Ontario's Protestant majority but was also a signal to the Americans that the British government strongly supported Canada's western claims.

The Manitoba Act of 1870 included all the essential rights that had been part of the Provisional government's demands. The land titles of the settlers were recognized, while the Métis received scrip, which could be exchanged for land. Technically, Riel's action in Red River was not rebellious because his Provisional government had filled a practical power vacuum in the Northwest. Riel effectively acquired a much more democratic form of government for the Red River colony than would have existed under the planned Canadian administration. Manitoba was guaranteed equality for French and English citizens and Catholic and Protestant schools. The one limit on provincial power was that non-title lands were to be administered by the federal government; these lands would eventually be used for the settlement of new immigrants and the subsidization of the railway.

The official position of the Canadian government had been ambiguous. By negotiating with the Red River delegation, the government implicitly recognized the Provisional government as a legally established authority. But at the same time, the Canadian government did

not accept the right of the provisional government to maintain law and order. Scott was clearly guilty of “treason” from the Provisional government’s point of view, yet his trial and execution were seen as illegal acts.

Developments in the Northwest

In the years following Manitoba’s entry into confederation, the province underwent great changes. The population had reached 25 000 by the end of 1871, and would increase six fold in the next twelve years. With the steady stream of new settlers, many Métis soon found their traditional way of life threatened. Some sold their scrip rather than redeem them for land, while others sold the lands they had received. They moved westward to the unsettled areas of the Northwest to continue their preferred way of life.

In Manitoba, land prices rapidly rose, and new settlers moved into the Northwest Territories where land was plentiful and inexpensive. During the next ten years, the Canadian government took a number of steps to secure the Northwest and make way for the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway and the agricultural development of the area. The North West Mounted Police was established and sent to the west to maintain law and order. Treaties number Six and Seven were negotiated with the Plains Cree and Blackfoot Confederacy respectively. This cleared the way for the C.P.R. and large-scale settlement of the Northwest.

With the treaties, the Canadian government hoped to avoid the costly wars of expansion that the United States had waged against the

native population in the American west. With the disappearance of the buffalo from the plains, the Cree and Blackfoot had little choice but to sign the treaties and attempt to make the transition to an agrarian lifestyle. The Canadian government had promised to supply the equipment and livestock necessary to make this transition, and to provide aid until this had been accomplished.

However, the costs of railway construction were far greater than had been anticipated, and additional funds to the C.P.R. had created a financial crisis in Ottawa. The Canadian government made budget cutbacks in many areas, one of them being the implementation of treaty obligations. The promised supplies needed for agricultural development were slow in coming, and aid in the form of rations to stave off starvation amongst the Cree and Blackfoot was minimal at best. The native population also felt uneasy about the rapid rate of immigration and settlement. After the hard winter of 1883-1884, government agents in the Northwest reported that discontent among the Cree in particular was growing to dangerous levels, and that the government should act quickly to rectify the situation.

The Métis were in a difficult position as well. The decimation of the buffalo herds had made their traditional way of life impossible, and many had turned more to agriculture to meet their needs. However, they had never formally established legal claims to their land, even though government agencies did exist in the west that would have allowed them to do so. The situation was far different than that of the Red River colony in 1870. There were no more unsettled areas where the Métis could relocate, and this created a sense of desperation among the Métis.

Profile: Big Bear

Big Bear was born in 1825. He was the son of the chief of a band of Cree known as the Prairie River People. They routinely lived on the plains during buffalo hunting season and wintered in the woodlands.

At age twelve, Big Bear contracted smallpox. Although he survived, the disease left his face pitted with scars. By the time he was a young man, the diminutive Big Bear (four feet, six inches tall) had acquired a reputation as a skilled and cunning warrior. He excelled at raiding enemy camps for horses. He developed his military skills in the many clashes with the Blackfoot.

After the death of his father, Big Bear, age forty, assumed the leadership of his band. At this time, the Cree were experiencing great hardship, as the buffalo herds had all but disappeared. Many of the Cree bands were faced with the choice of starvation or signing treaties to get food and government assistance in making the transition to farming.

Big Bear was reluctant to sign the treaty, and spent two years traveling through the Northwest trying to convince the native peoples to unite their bands in a common cause. Big Bear argued that if all the First Nations united, they had a much better chance of getting more equitable treatment from the Canadian government. He also wanted to have all reserve lands located adjacent to each other, giving the native peoples a large, more viable territory. However, with the growing starvation amongst his people, he was eventually forced to sign an agreement promising to adhere to the conditions of Treaty Six in 1880.

By 1884, many Cree were looking to Big Bear for leadership in the looming crisis. Although Big Bear had many complaints with the government about honouring their treaty obligations to the Cree, he tried to follow a course of moderation.

He found it difficult to control Wandering Spirit and the more belligerent warriors. At Frog Lake he managed to stop Wandering Spirit's men from killing the entire population of the settlement. He arranged to have the police and civilians at Fort Pitt leave unmolested before Wandering Spirit's warriors took possession of the Fort.

When he was attacked at Frenchman's Butte, Big Bear demonstrated his outstanding military skills. His preparations and deployment of his men in a fortified position showed a sound understanding of modern warfare, and he effectively nullified the advantages of the police and militia before offering battle.

At his trial, his lawyer argued that the Canadian government should actually thank Big Bear for his actions, which had prevented the large-scale bloodshed of the non-native population. Big Bear was eloquent in his defence, but was nevertheless found guilty and imprisoned.

In prison, Big Bear's health began to fail him. The authorities did not want him to die in prison, and he was soon released. He arrived at Poundmaker's reserve a month later. In January of 1888, Big Bear died in his sleep at the age of 62.

The situation for the settlers in the Northwest was no less critical. After a period of initial prosperity, there had been a substantial decrease in grain prices. The resulting hardship was exacerbated by the fact that farmers still had to pay high tariffs to ship their grain by rail to the east. Some agrarian leaders talked of open rebellion. In Manitoba, a representative of the “Farmer’s Union” called for direct action. Farther west, British and European settlers were also in a rebellious mood. An editorial in the *Edmonton Bulletin* pointed out that the rights enjoyed by Ontario and Quebec had only been realized after armed insurrection in 1837, and that Manitoba’s rights as a province had been won through open rebellion.

“If history is to be taken as a guide, what could be plainer than that without rebellion the people of the Northwest need expect nothing, while with rebellion, successful or otherwise, they may reasonably expect to get their rights.”

The Northwest Rebellion

In the spring of 1884, the Métis invited Louis Riel to return from Montana to lead them again in their struggle with the Canadian government, and he arrived in Prince Albert the following spring. The situation had little in common with that at Red River in 1870. Canadian authority was firmly established, represented by a civilian administration and enforced by the North West Mounted Police. The non-native population was far greater, and the C.P.R. and telegraph system allowed for better communication between the Northwest and central Canada. If conditions were different, so was Louis Riel. Regardless of what his

mental state may have been at the time, he would display little of the political skills and leadership that had been so evident in 1870.

Riel’s return precipitated a strong reaction in the Métis population, and their discontent became more vocal and belligerent. There was strong support from the Cree under the leadership of Poundmaker and Big Bear, who both tried to exercise a degree of moderation but were still prepared to resort to more aggressive actions if the government refused to address their grievances. Fighting broke out in March when the Métis and North West Mounted Police confronted each other at Duck Lake.

The result of the conflict may seem to have been a foregone conclusion, but there were several factors that suggested that the struggle could be a protracted and costly affair.

The Métis and Cree

Both the Métis and the Cree possessed skills that made them an impressive military force. The tradition of the buffalo hunt had produced men who were fine horsemen and excellent marksmen. Amongst the Métis, the organization of the annual hunt lent itself well to the formation of a military chain of command. While the Cree were perhaps less disposed toward formal military discipline, they were a formidable force when fighting in their own element.

Both also had a considerable degree of combat experience. The Métis were the veterans of several clashes with the Dakota (Sioux), and the Cree had fought numerous large-scale battles with the Blackfoot Confederacy. To complement their tactical ability and experience, they had an intimate knowledge of the terrain over which the fighting would take

place. Their mobility would allow them to set up rapid lines of communication and conduct hit-and-run operations.

The military commander of the Métis, Gabriel Dumont, was himself a decided advantage for the rebel forces. His sound knowledge of the area was coupled with a fine tactical and strategic sense that made him a force to be reckoned with. He was a veteran of the highly mobile warfare of the western plains, and had amply demonstrated his leadership capabilities.

There were factors that placed limitations upon the kind of war that the Métis and Cree could wage. The most significant was manpower. Riel had failed to win widespread support amongst many native leaders, due in great part to his refusal to destroy the railway lines. It may be assumed that Riel left the railways intact because he did not want to further antagonize the Canadian government. However, many native leaders recognized how significant the railway would be in the conflict because of its capacity to transport large quantities of men and *matériel*, and Riel's refusal to disrupt the railway cost him a significant number of potential allies. The limited supplies of food and ammunition accentuated the critical shortage of manpower.

The Métis and Cree would have to conduct a highly mobile war, relying upon manoeuvre to place the Canadian troops in positions where their superior numbers and weaponry could not be brought to bear. The only hope of victory would be to win a quick and decisive victory over the Canadians. The limited resources available to the rebels could not support a lengthy struggle.

Riel himself was a serious military disadvantage. His constant meddling in the conduct of

military operations frustrated Dumont's attempts to apply a winning strategy. Without Riel's interference, Dumont might well have been able to inflict a serious defeat on the Canadian forces.

Middleton, the Militia and the North West Mounted Police

The immediate advantage enjoyed by Middleton, commander of the Militia, was a definite superiority in numbers. While the troops were not uniformly equipped with the same rifles, there was an adequate supply of ammunition and supplies. The major obstacle to surmount would be the movement of the men and *matériel* once the army had disembarked from the main C.P.R. line.

The North West Mounted Police force was another advantage for Middleton, as the police gave him a mobile force that was familiar with the terrain. This was amply demonstrated when Irvine's force had marched from Regina into the Northwest with impressive speed, despite the fact that the troopers had experienced the severe weather conditions. The detachments of the N.W.M.P. assigned to the militia would provide a valuable scouting role for the army, acting as a cavalry screen to protect the main force during its advance toward the Métis and Cree strongholds.

The Canadian Pacific Railway was a significant logistical advantage. It not only carried the Canadian forces to the west relatively quickly but also ensured a steady stream of *matériel* from central Canada to the main supply depots in the west. Once the men and supplies had reached the depots, however, Middleton was faced with the difficult task of moving them northward during the less than ideal spring conditions.

Profile: Frederick Middleton

Sir Frederick Middleton was born on 4 November 1825 in Belfast, Ireland.

He received his education at the Royal Military College in Sandhurst, England, and was commissioned in 1842.

He served in many parts of the Empire, including Australia, New Zealand, India, Burma, Gibraltar and Malta. He distinguished himself as a staff officer during the Indian Mutiny of 1857-1858, and was twice recommended for the Victoria Cross. From 1868 to 1870, he was stationed in Canada, where he married Montreal native Eugénie Doucet.

In 1884, Colonel Middleton accepted the post of General Officer of the Canadian Militia. In 1885, he was appointed to command the army during

the Northwest Rebellion. Middleton was a cautious officer, and took great care not to expose his men to unnecessary risks. This was of particular importance in the 1885 campaign, as his army was composed almost entirely of untried militia. Middleton displayed superior organizational abilities in dealing with the considerable logistical problems that faced his forces in 1885.

Middleton was granted \$20 000 by the Parliament of Canada and knighted by Queen Victoria for his service in the Northwest Rebellion. He resigned from his position as commander of the militia in 1890. Middleton ended his military career as the appointed keeper of the Crown Jewels.

There would be little available forage for the horses until May, and the Canadians would have to transport forage as well as other supplies by wagon. The teams pulling the wagons would consume about half the load of forage transported.

Attempts to move supplies to the advancing troops with steam riverboats proved extremely difficult because the rivers were still low when the campaign began. Even after water levels had risen enough to make the rivers navigable, shipments of men, ammunition and supplies were often delayed due to a shortage of experienced riverboat pilots.

The lack of forage and the difficulty of transporting supplies meant that the Canadian forces could not employ mounted troops in any significant numbers. While useful for

reconnaissance and security, cavalry would not be a significant tactical force for Middleton's army.

The quality of the militia was a serious concern. Many of the men were from eastern farms and urban centers and had little experience with weapons or the physical hardships of campaigning in the field. Middleton was besieged with requests from company commanders for ammunition so that their men could be trained in the use of their rifles. In fact, many of the militiamen had never fired a gun.

The ensuing conflict was to be waged by two very different adversaries. One, skillful in horsemanship and weaponry, had a thorough knowledge of the land, yet was very limited in terms of men and *matériel*. The other pos-

essed a superiority of men and *matériel*, but was composed of raw recruits, while its extended supply lines dictated that strategic mobility would be limited.

The 1885 Campaign

Middleton's primary objective was Batoche, the centre of Métis resistance. He hoped to quell the rebellion with one decisive action. The deployment and advances of the Canadian forces developed along somewhat different lines. Middleton reluctantly agreed to allow a sizeable detachment under the command of Colonel Otter to march northward from Swift Current to relieve "besieged" Battleford. Another contingent, led by General Strange, was composed of French-Canadians that Middleton did not particularly wish to have under his command. It was to move north from Calgary to Edmonton and from there proceed eastward down the North Saskatchewan River. Strange's force was accompanied by a complement of N.W.M.P. under Colonel Steele.

The deployment of the troops in such a way had the effect of geographically containing the rebellion, and would ultimately prevent the rendezvous of Poundmaker's and Big Bear's Cree with the Métis at Batoche.

For the Métis and their allies, Gabriel Dumont wanted to pursue an aggressive campaign, using his superior mobility to harry the advancing forces under General Middleton. At Duck Lake, Riel's intervention had prevented Dumont from inflicting a devastating defeat on Crozier's police force. When Irvine and his N.W.M.P. troopers abandoned Fort Carleton, Riel prevented Dumont from pursuing the retreating N.W.M.P. and probably saved them from annihilation.

The failure of Dumont to pursue a consistently aggressive strategy was directly due to Riel's interference, which seriously undermined the chances of victory. The Métis must bring the Canadians to battle quickly while there were still ample supplies and ammunition, and maintain the initiative if they were to have any hope of success. Once Dumont had conceded to Riel's demand to fall back and fortify Batoche, the advantages of the Métis were negated and defeat was certain. By following such a course of action, Riel was committing his forces to an attritional war in which they did not have the resources to sustain.

Fish Creek, 24 April:

After leaving Qu'appelle, Middleton had already made alterations to his original plans. Colonel Otter's force at Swift Current was originally to have traveled by steamer to rendezvous with Middleton's contingent as soon as the river was navigable. However, urgent messages from Colonel Irvine and Inspector Morris at Battleford had led to Otter's force being diverted. It would instead march overland to relieve Battleford.

Once he had reached Clarke's Crossing on the South Saskatchewan River, Middleton divided his force and advanced up both sides of the river. He was confident that either half of his army would be sufficient to deal with any resistance encountered. Supplies were to be transported from the C.P.R. line by the steamer *Northcote*, but, as river levels fell, navigation became exceedingly difficult. The delays in shipping supplies for the army held the advance up from time to time.

On 22 April, this divided force proceeded to advance downriver toward Batoche.

Boulton's scouts, who reported recent enemy activity in the area, headed the group on the southern bank. Despite Middleton's confidence, he exercised caution as the army advanced.

On the morning of 23 April, Dumont finally convinced Riel to allow him to confront Middleton's advancing columns. Although he had been well informed of enemy movements, Riel had prevented Dumont from utilizing the Métis superior mobility to harass Middleton's force. Dumont led a group of two hundred Métis and Chief White Cap's Teton Dakota toward Fish Creek, but fifty returned to Batoche after receiving false reports that a force of N.W.M.P. was advancing on Batoche from Battleford. Dumont deployed his men in the wooded cover on the north banks of Fish Creek, then attempted to lure Boulton's mounted force into the coulee. Boulton's experience prevented him from falling into the trap. The left flank of Middleton's force came under fire as Boulton's scouts dug in on the right.

Two artillery batteries were brought up to the edge of the coulee, but their line of fire did not allow them to shell the Métis and Dakota. However, the artillery crews on the crest of the slope provided excellent targets for the accurate fire of the Métis and Dakota riflemen.

Attempts by the Ninetieth Rifle Regiment to rush the rebels were repulsed by devastating rifle fire, and Middleton was faced with a stalemate. The terrain provided Dumont with a defensible location, and any attempts to assault the rebel force would cost more casualties than Middleton could afford to sustain.

However, the less disciplined Dakota began to withdraw, and Dumont's position became less

secure. Faced with the prospect of being eventually outflanked and aware of the possibility that the other half of Middleton's force might cross the river to enter the battle, Dumont was compelled to withdraw even though reinforcements from Batoche were beginning to arrive.

Cut Knife Hill, 2 May:

Colonel Otter's march from Swift Current to Battleford had been uneventful. Other than finding two hundred wagons to provide his infantry with a degree of mobility, Otter faced no insurmountable challenges, either with transportation or from enemy action. Upon reaching Battleford, Otter proposed to launch an assault on Poundmaker's Cree and Stoney allies. Against Middleton's wishes, but with the support of Governor Dewdney, Otter selected his better troops together with seventy-five mounted police to advance on Poundmaker's camp. Otter also attached two old N.W.M.P. artillery pieces and a Gatling gun to his force.

Otter caught the Cree relatively unawares, although they had moved their camp east of Cut Knife Creek on the other side of the hill. Otter seized the hill, hoping to gain the advantage of an elevated feature with a greater field of fire. But the Cree's quick recovery after initial surprise allowed them to counter Otter's manoeuvre.

Poundmaker used the gullies and wooded areas around Cut Knife Hill to his advantage. The Cree and Stoney warriors began to move around either side of Otter's force, and the Canadians were soon outflanked on both the right and left. They were threatened with complete encirclement. The wooded terrain around the base of the hill had allowed

Window on War: Cut Knife Hill - 2 May 1885

A young warrior rushed up to Poundmaker's tipi.

"Poundmaker," he panted, "Soldiers are coming!" His hand waved excitedly to the west.

Poundmaker's brow furrowed. "Where exactly are they headed?"

"Up the hill, and they have two cannon with them, and a bluecoat with one of those big guns that fire many bullets!"

Poundmaker's face betrayed no emotion. Many warriors had begun to gather around and whisper excitedly amongst themselves. Poundmaker motioned for silence, then spoke in a calm, determined voice. "Well, they cannot hit what they cannot see." He pointed to a group of warriors to his left, and addressed their leader.

"You take your men into the woods north of the hill. Spread out. Shoot. Then move. Stay in cover and don't give them an easy target." The warriors rushed off. There were no war cries. The men understood that silence was essential, and that any noise might betray their intentions.

Poundmaker turned to a second group, a mixture of Cree and Stoney warriors. "Go and do the same to the south of that hill. Now hurry, and don't let them see you! Otherwise, all might fail."

Within a short time, Poundmaker's men were in position. Soon the crackling sounds of rifle-fire told the camp that the fighting had started.

This was not Eagle's first battle. He had tasted the exhilarating combination of excitement and fear against the Blackfoot. To him, the soldiers' position was precarious. They had placed themselves in the open, and from their exposed

position could not see their foe, let alone return fire. Their ranks were all chaos and confusion.

He popped up, aimed and fired. A soldier collapsed. As soon as Eagle dropped back into the cover of the trees, he hurriedly sprinted several yards to the right. A torrent of rifle bullets ripped through the foliage where he had just been. Again he fired and moved to a new position. Again, the soldiers' fire was wide of the mark.

"Poundmaker, they are retreating."

"I thought they meant to leave. I'm surprised their leader took so long to decide. He put his men into a very dangerous situation."

"Should we follow? If we do, none of them will escape!"

Poundmaker fixed his gaze on the warrior. "We will not."

The warrior's eyes widened in surprise. "But..."

Poundmaker cut him off in mid-sentence. His tone was firm and uncompromising.

"Are there other soldiers and police nearby? Do you know? If we chase these soldiers, who will protect the camp, the women and children? Our elders? Besides, there is no honour to be gained by shooting men in the back."

Poundmaker paused for a moment, his voice dropped and his countenance became grave. "We can expect no help from the Métis. Riel has them bottled up at Batoche, and by doing so he has thrown away any hope of victory. We cannot win, and a pile of dead soldiers will not help us when the time comes for talking peace. We have protected our people. That is enough."

Poundmaker to nullify Otter's advantage of higher ground.

The decrepit seven-pounders were falling off their gun carriages after a few rounds had been fired, and the Gatling gun was ineffective against the well-hidden Cree. Otter's punitive mission had become one of survival, as he fought to extricate his men from a dangerous position. Only Poundmaker's refusal to allow his warriors to pursue the retreating Canadians saved Otter's men. Had Poundmaker not been firm in keeping his action purely a defensive one, Otter's force would have been annihilated.

A lieutenant with Otter's force later commented on his impression of the Cree as fighters:

“They are the beau ideal of skirmishers, expose themselves but little and move with marvelous quickness.”

Frenchman's Butte, 28 May:

General Strange had made careful preparations before advancing down the North Saskatchewan from Edmonton. He organized his mounted contingent under the command of Colonel Steele. Some of his troops traveled by barge, with a ferry in tow should it be necessary for the army to cross the river. Big Bear had no knowledge of Strange's advance.

The most belligerent of the Cree were the young warriors led by Wandering Spirit. At Frog Lake on 2 April, they had attacked the settlers and seized the contents of a storehouse, which included a substantial amount of alcohol. After the young warriors had consumed the alcohol they killed six men, two women and two priests before Big Bear could inter-

vene. The killings at Frog Lake effectively eliminated any white support for Riel's actions. Many settlers began to see the rebellion as an indiscriminate act directed against all white men, not just the Canadian government.

The Cree now had many hostages, with the Plains Cree wishing to kill them while the Wood Cree were just as determined to keep them alive. This issue, as well as differences over how best to take advantage of the Métis uprising, caused a serious rift between the two groups. In an attempt to reconcile these differences, a Thirst Dance was initiated on 25 May at Frenchman's Butte, twelve miles east of Fort Pitt.

Before beginning the ceremony, Big Bear had instructed the warriors to prepare a defensive position in the event of an attack. The wooded high ground of Frenchman's Butte was strengthened with a line of rifle pits located along the heavily wooded slopes. Two small rivers and impassable marshes protected the front, rear and flanks of the position.

When General Strange's column approached from the east, Big Bear had sufficient warning to deploy his men in their prepared defensive position. The Canadian force advanced over open ground while Colonel Steele attempted to outflank the right side of the Cree position. The militia was exposed to accurate fire from the concealed rifle pits, and artillery was brought up to support the attack. The artillery fire caused an initial panic among the Cree, who began to withdraw while the Canadian troops were also retreating. Big Bear managed to rally his men, but did not pursue the retreating militiamen. His actions saved the Canadian force from a serious defeat.



National Archives of Canada (C-000190, work by Alfred Sandham).

Frog Lake Massacre: Young Cree warriors led by Wandering Spirit killed several settlers before Big Bear could intervene to stop them.

Batoche, 12 May:

After the confrontation at Fish Creek, Dumont retired to Batoche while Middleton decided to re-unite his army on the west bank of the river. He then waited for the riverboat *Northcote* to deliver needed men and supplies. The steamer, however, had found the navigation difficult, and arrived a full ten days later than scheduled.

With the setback at Fish Creek, Middleton decided not to move on Batoche until his force had been sufficiently reinforced and supplied. To complement his final advance, he outfitted the *Northcote* as a gunboat, planning to threaten the Métis rear from the river while his infantry attacked from the landward side.

With eight hundred and fifty men, four artillery pieces and a Gatling gun under the command of Captain Howard of the United States Army, Middleton began his advance on 7 May, arriving at Batoche two days later.

Middleton's arrival did not coincide with that of the *Northcote*. Dumont had anticipated the gunboat's attempt to shell his positions from the river and had his men string a ferry cable across the river. As the steamer came under fire, the cable demolished the wheelhouse and smokestacks. Severely damaged, the *Northcote* drifted helplessly downstream and out of the battle.

The Métis dispositions at Batoche were well prepared, with carefully sited rifle pits running the length of the wooded area facing the Canadian force. It was a formidable barrier to assault. Both flanks were secured by the South Saskatchewan River, and the elimination of the *Northcote* had secured the rear. However, Dumont's forces had no line of retreat should the battle not go in their favour, and from their dispositions it was clear that this battle was to be the final one.

The far right flank of the Métis line ended at the cemetery and church, and there was a gap large enough for the Canadian infantry to advance and place themselves between Dumont's men and the river. During 10 and 11 May, there was only light skirmishing

between the forces, as Middleton was unsure of Métis strength and reluctant to launch a full-scale attack.

Middleton planned his assault for 12 May. The cavalry force would create a diversion across the left and centre of the rebel entrenchments while the infantry would advance upon the Métis right. Once the infantry had gained the area around the cemetery and church, they were to wheel and assault the centre and rear areas, coming up behind the rifle pits. By mid-morning, some of the infantry had advanced well into the right flank, and had temporarily dug in near the cemetery and church.

For some unexplained reason, the commander of the main infantry force, Van Straubenzie, failed to hear the agreed signal to attack. His



National Archives of Canada (C-006078, work by William Daniel Blatchley).

Batoche, 12 May 1885: Canadian militia overrun Métis positions during the final stages of the battle.

men did not advance while the cavalry created the planned diversion in front of the Métis lines. The feint was a wasted manoeuvre and Middleton, furious at the failure of his plan, retired to his tent.

Early in the afternoon, the main body of infantry began to advance, apparently without orders. Soon numbers of militia swelled the ranks of volunteers already advancing and a headlong charge spontaneously developed. Exhausted and low on ammunition, the Métis were still anticipating a frontal attack. They were totally surprised and overcome by this sudden movement from the right. Soon Boulton's mounted men and the rest of the force joined in the charge. Batoche had fallen.

Riel surrendered to the authorities on 15 May. Big Bear, after a slow pursuit by Middleton, surrendered voluntarily at Fort Carleton. The rebellion was effectively over.

Analysis of the 1885 Campaign

For the Dominion of Canada, the 1885 campaign represented the young nation's first experience in mounting a large-scale military operation. The most successful aspect of the campaign had been in logistics. The time of year in which the operations took place was certainly not the most favourable, with such obstacles as areas of sodden muskeg and erratic river levels. The length of the marches and the maintenance of extended supply lines were daunting tasks. Considering the difficulties that faced the Canadian troops, the successful advances to the north in early spring conditions were a notable achievement.

Middleton had refused to send detachments to every settlement pleading for protection, and

his refusal to disperse his army was an astute decision. The General should be given credit for relentlessly pursuing his goal as well as conditions would allow. Fortunately for the Canadians, Riel's decision to fortify Batoche as the Métis stronghold fit in well with Middleton's overall strategy of striking at the geographic centre of the insurrection.

The marches of Otter and Strange's contingents were well executed. Both were faced with very difficult conditions, and the speed of their advances was impressive. Otter's decision to partially transport his infantry in wagons greatly enhanced his mobility. Strange's force, undertaking perhaps the most difficult route, did well. His advance eastward from Edmonton displayed the thoroughness of his planning, especially the inclusion of barges and a ferry with his force as it marched along the North Saskatchewan.

In terms of combat, the Canadian commanders did not display a sound understanding of tactical deployment suitable to the terrain. This was first evident at Duck Lake, where Crozier's force of N.W.M.P. and volunteers were placed in an open area with woods on either side. This gave Dumont the opportunity to outflank Crozier's men from covered positions and set up a murderous crossfire. Only Riel's decision to prevent Dumont from fully implementing his plan saved the Canadians from destruction.

At Cut Knife Hill, Otter had only a partial understanding of battlefield deployment. While taking high ground is generally a sound tactic, the advantage is nullified if the prominent feature is surrounded by wooded and irregular terrain. Otter placed his militia and N.W.M.P. in a dangerous situation. The coulees and woods around Cut Knife Hill

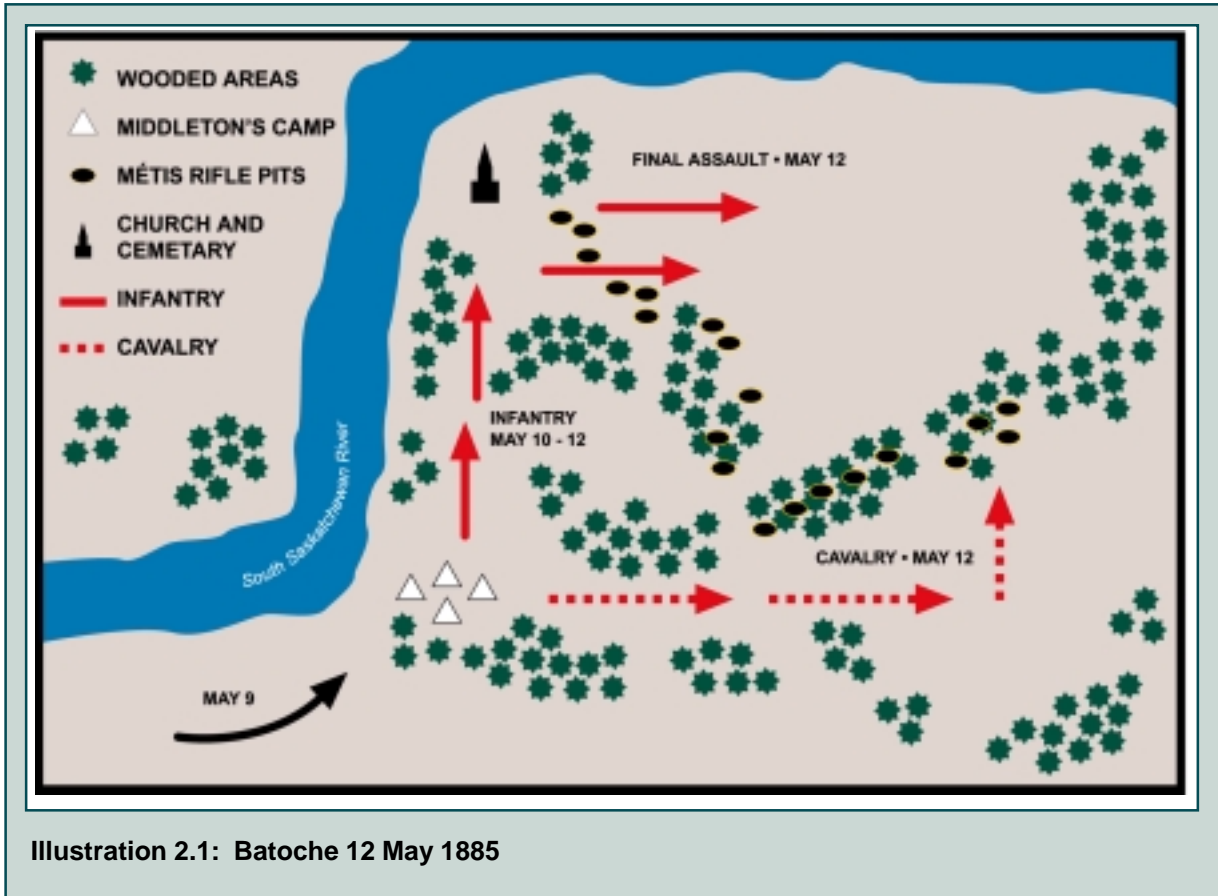
allowed Poundmaker to successfully infiltrate both flanks of the Canadian troops, and threaten Otter's men with complete envelopment. Poundmaker's refusal to press the attack allowed Otter to avoid a crushing defeat.

At Frenchman's Butte, Big Bear demonstrated a proper appreciation for tactical deployment. Here the Cree deployed along a prominent feature with ample cover, forcing Strange's force to advance over open ground. Again, the failure of the Cree to exploit their success with pursuit minimized the casualties suffered by Strange's troops; Middleton had advanced with little incident until he reached Fish Creek, where Dumont had deployed his men for an ambush. Boulton's refusal to follow the Métis into the coulee was a sound military

decision, as it could have cost Middleton the bulk of his mounted troops. The premature commencement of fire by the Métis demonstrated a lack of combat discipline, which forewarned Middleton of an ambush. Although Dumont's plan did not meet the objective he had set, it clearly demonstrated to Middleton the high quality of the adversary he was facing and the shortcomings of the militia.

As a consequence, Middleton would carefully prepare before moving on Batoche.

Once the Canadians had reached Batoche, the campaign had already been decided. Middleton possessed a considerable advantage in men and *matériel*, while the Dumont was desperately short of both. With the fall of Batoche, the rebellion was over.



The comparative brevity of the campaign was due in no small part to Riel himself. His intervention in Dumont's conduct of the war was disastrous for the Métis and Cree. Had Dumont been free to follow up on his victories with pursuit, he would have potentially gained the Métis valuable arms, ammunition and hostages. His strategy of harassing the advancing forces was a very sound one, and could have cost the Canadians dearly in men and *matériel*. The allied force of Teton Dakota, seasoned in cavalry tactics, gave Dumont a highly mobile force capable of mounting effective hit-and-run forays on Middleton's columns.

Riel succeeded in preventing Dumont from implementing his plans, and the Métis spent valuable time and effort fortifying Batoche. Thus committed, they were bound to wage an attritional war that they did not have the resources to win. As the conflict progressed, the quality of the militia improved dramatically. The troops that launched the final assault at Batoche were far more capable and

confident than the inexperienced recruits who had been sent to the Northwest in the spring of 1885.

Had Dumont been given a free hand in the conduct of the war, there was every possibility that the campaign would have been a long and costly one for the Canadian government. Rapid and decisive victories by Dumont might also have persuaded more native leaders to support the rebellion, greatly increasing the manpower available to Dumont. The Macdonald administration would have been faced with the prospect of a large-scale uprising in the west, and might have seen negotiation as the only feasible way of ending the hostilities.

As it was, Riel's actions accelerated the settlement of the west. After 1885, the time and money invested by the Conservative government in the C.P.R. had been justified. Any possibility of further native resistance had been eliminated, and the Northwest could be regarded as a safe and secure area for settlement. A flood of immigrants would soon follow. ■

Recalling Facts

Match each name or item with the correct description.

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| 1. Gabriel Dumont | A. the battle where Dumont's forces confronted Middleton's army |
| 2. General Middleton | B. surrendered voluntarily to Middleton at Fort Carleton |
| 3. Poundmaker | C. Commanded the contingent that advanced from Swift Current to Battleford. |
| 4. Fish Creek | D. Military commander of the Métis forces |
| 5. Colonel Irvine | E. Site of the battle between Big Bear's Cree and Canadian forces |
| 6. Frenchman's Butte | F. Commander-in-Chief of the Canadian Army in the Northwest |
| 7. Big Bear | G. The final battle between the Métis and the Canadian Army |
| 8. Cut Knife Hill | H. Battle where Otter's contingent was defeated by the Cree |
| 9. Batoche | I. Led the main N.W.M.P. detachment from Regina into the Northwest |
| 10. Colonel Otter | J. Leader of the Cree at Cut Knife Hill |

Chapter Review

- What factors created concern among the Red River population over the transfer of the colony to Canadian administration?
 - What was the response in central Canada to Thomas Scott's trial and execution?
- What were the main grievances of the people in the Northwest in 1884?
 - Why was the Canadian government slow in implementing their treaty obligations to the Cree and Blackfoot?
- What were the primary military advantages of the Métis and Cree forces in 1885?
 - List the strengths of the Canadian military forces in the Northwest.
- What was Gabriel Dumont's proposed plan of operations against the Canadian Army?
 - How was Riel a factor in the military defeat of the Métis and Cree?

Critical Thinking

- Choose one of the Métis or Cree leaders and research his personal history in order to answer the following questions.
 - Was he an effective leader?
 - In your opinion, were his actions justifiable?
 - What military leadership and abilities did he demonstrate during the 1885 campaign?
- Was the defeat of the Métis and Native forces inevitable?