

The Sacking and Looting of Batoche:

Free Press, August 27, 1885

At present the government are glorying in their victory and applaud themselves as upon a great triumph in having defeated the half-breeds. Riel is condemned, the chief half-breeds of Saskatchewan are pinned in irons and in its enthusiasm Parliament was voted \$20,000.00 to General Middleton. All Canada is proud of his success and that of the volunteers. We rejoice with the rest of the nation on the ending, of this rebellion we strenuously opposed foreseeing all the evils it would entail.

But I must say at the risk of shocking some persons who I love and esteem that General Middleton's army disgraced themselves by the shameful pillage to which the troops abandoned themselves notwithstanding the general order forbidding them to touch anything and take anything. I do not speak from hearsay but from personal inspection on several occasions of the country surrounding Batoche. I can confirm that for a distance of twenty five miles all the houses on the south bank of the Saskatchewan were sacked and plundered and more than twenty were burned and raised to the ground. This region previously so flourishing presents a picture of desolation and distress pitiful to behold. The volunteers robbed the inhabitants of all they had in the world, their horses, goods and wearing apparel and only left the unfortunate people what they had on their backs.

The General was humane and mild towards them, he subjected them to no cruel treatment but he remained impassive to all the looting going on around him in defiance of his order and he himself as if to encourage others to plunder personally appropriated a fine horse and vehicle belonging to one Manuel Champagne which he presented to Thomas Hourie. These are facts of which I am positive and the militia Minister may effect ignorance of them as long as he likes but they are not the less true and real. The result of all this is that our poor half-breeds are reduced to direct distress and misery. . . . But if the government continues to treat them in a spirit of vengeance begotten of victory they may prepare themselves for brave consequences. The seeds of discord and hatred will be sown between the different races inhabiting this country which will be handed down from father to son and we shall have in the Northwest a kind of Ireland in which the two races will cordially detest and treat each other like sworn enemies. At this time they have imprisoned one man by the name of Thomas Scott of Prince Albert for having too publically displayed his sympathy for the half-breeds and spoke ill of the government.

We live under a reign of terror which recalls the scenes of the disturbed countries in the Old World. We may expect anything this time.

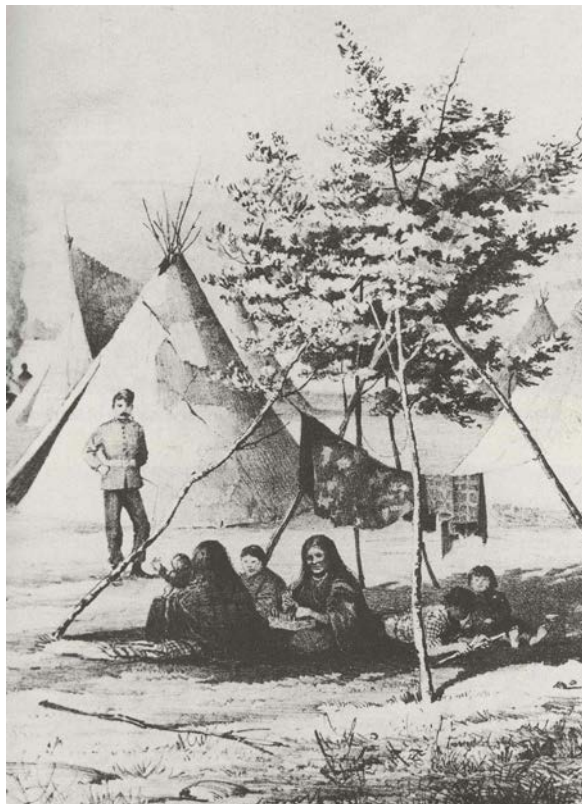
On June 4, 1885 Father André sends a strongly worded letter to Bishop Taché in which he pleads for assistance to the Metis people:

(I) would say that the expedition had mostly for its goal to pillage and to steal. Besides the cruelty that the volunteers aren't exempt from, they are liars, looters and resemble more vandals than Christian soldiers. I cannot list the facts, because it will

carry me away too far, but you can count on the accuracy of what I bring forward, you can be certain Your Excellency that the conduct of the volunteers will raise a large indignation when the facts are known.

General Middleton left in the hands of Father Vegreville & of Antoine 50 bags of flour and 2 or 3 pounds of bacon to distribute to those most in need. But remember that these provisions were confiscated from the rebels, and what relief can this multitude of unfortunates receive from this small quantity of provisions – already Father Vegreville distributed it all and the government doesn't make any arrangements to nourish the starving around us. I think the government would do better to exterminate all these unfortunates rather than leave them to perish by degrees, that cruelty would be more humane than to leave them to suffer by the indifference they show for their misery.

We have all around us a population unarmed, but delivered (handed over) to the horrors of hunger. I see the vengeance that is brewing in these hearts and one day the government will pay dearly for this inhumanity towards these poor people who are willing to submit, but despair will throw them into crime. Your Excellency, use your influence to come to our rescue!¹



A Metis refugee camp at Fort Pitt, from the Public Archives of Manitoba, taken from a newspaper front page in 1885.

¹ Archives Deschâtelets, Ottawa: André-Taché, Prince Albert, June 4, 1885. Translated by Rose-Marie Carey.

Middleton's own soldiers wrote about the looting that took place. In his diary entry Harold Rusden gives the following account:²

All the rebels' houses round about, of course, were pillaged, and it was comical to see some of the booty brought into camp. An infantry man might be seen with a small pig under one arm and a squaw's dress on the other, sneaking in through the lines so as not to be seen; scouts coming in with pots and pans tied to their saddles, poultry and other paraphernalia hanging about. One fellow in particular cut a very amusing figure. He had a tin pot on his head, various other cooking utensils hung about his saddle, some ten or fifteen fowls strung round his cartridge belt, several pairs of trousers hung to the back of his saddle, while under his arm he carried a small organ. Looting now seemed to be the order of the day. Everything that could be carried away was taken and the rebels' houses stripped and devastated. We were out mounted during the day running the rebels' cattle and slaughtering them...

All the houses and buildings belonging to this man [Gabriel Dumont] were burned to the ground. After dinner we immediately broke open the doors and proceeded to loot. The place, of course, had been deserted as all the houses had along our lines of march. In Gabriel's house we found a box of cigars, some coins, gloves, and a lot of store goods which we immediately stowed away. In another of his houses we found a billiard table and various articles of civilized furniture. After this we got the order to mount and fall in and the march home was resumed. It is needless to say that we looted the whole way home.



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² Rusden, Harold Penryn. "Notes on the Suppression of the Northwest Insurrection." In R.C. Macleod, *Reminiscences of a Bungle By One of the Bunglers*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983: 267-270.