

# Louis “David” Riel. (1844-1885)

By Darren Préfontaine

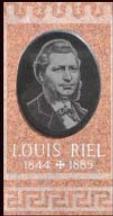
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# Louis Riel

## Founding Father of Manitoba

**2011**  
Louis Riel is officially recognized as the leader of the first Provisional Government of Manitoba.

**2008**  
For many years, Louis Riel and the Metis were the “forgotten people”. As generations pass Louis Riel and his actions continue to be revisited. In 2008, Louis Riel’s contributions are symbolically recognized with the creation of Louis Riel Day, the third Monday in February of each year.



**1844**  
Louis Riel is born in the Red River Settlement to Julie Lagimodière and Louis Riel on Oct 22, 1844. He is the eldest of eleven children.

**1858**  
Louis Riel is locally educated by the clergy of Saint Boniface before being sent to Montreal to study for the priesthood.

**1869-70**  
Louis Riel returns to the Red River Settlement as a young man who is politically aware. He becomes the President of the Provisional Government which negotiates the entrance of Manitoba, as a province, into Canadian confederation.

**1870 - 1885**  
Immediately following the creation of the province of Manitoba, Louis Riel is forced into exile. He moves throughout eastern Canada and the northern United States before settling in Montana as a teacher. He marries and has three children. All three children pass away at a young age.

**November 16, 1885**  
Following the trial, Louis Riel is executed in Regina. Many other Metis leaders are jailed.

**1885**  
The Metis of Batoche and the surrounding area ask Louis Riel for assistance to get title to their land. The North-West Resistance sees Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont wage a resistance against the Canadian government. The Metis are overcome by the Canadian army and Louis Riel gives himself up for trial.

**“On behalf of our Metis citizens, our METIS GOVERNMENT extends our best wishes to all Manitobans and visitors to come together and enjoy our beautiful province. Louis Riel Day is a time for families to take part in the many venues our province has to offer and remember the legacy of our Father of Confederation.”**

President David Chartrand, Manitoba Metis Federation

Louis Riel: Metis patriot, martyr, thinker and founder of Manitoba, born in St. Boniface, Red River, October 22, 1844 to Louis riel Sr. and Julie Lagimodière; husband of Marguerite Monet *dite* Belehumeur and father to Jean and Angelique; executed for High Treason, Regina, NWT, November 16, 1885.

Handsome, intelligent, pious, and loving, Louis riel seemed, even as a child, destined for greatness. From his activist father, he inherited a strong sense of duty and love of community, and from his mother, he acquired an intense piety. In 1858, local priests hoped to make young Riel one of their own, by sending him to the esteemed Collège de Montréal. However, in 1864, after the trauma of his father's death, Riel left the college and went to work in a law firm, which ended after a failed courtship. He returned to Red River in 1868.

During the Red River Resistance (October 1869-May 1870), Louis Riel first came to prominence. Twenty-four years old, educated and articulate, Riel arrived home in time to participate in the Métis resistance against Canada's annexation of Rupert's Land. Eventually becoming president of the Métis-led Provisional Government, Riel formed partnerships with many French Métis, and used Métis boatmen and bison hunters to enforce the governing council's will, particularly against the "Canadian Party," a collection of Euro-Canadian annexationists, and "loyal" French and English Métis. Riel eventually won the backing of most of the Provisional Government's delegates by advancing a Francophone-Catholic rights agenda as opposed to others, such as William Dease, who championed the Métis' corporate Aboriginal rights. With *The Manitoba Act*, Riel *et al* provided Manitoba with bilingual public and educational institutions (Section 22); however, only Sections 31-32 dealt with the Métis Aboriginal rights through the individual extinguishment of their "Indian" title to the land. As a result of these provisions and the execution of Thomas Scott (March 4, 1870) — a rabid Orangeman and francophobe — by a Métis tribunal, the Red River Insurgency, was viewed by Ontario as a "French" rebellion rather than an Aboriginal resistance.

From 1870-1884, Louis riel led a perilous existence, which included defending Manitoba against Fenian attack (1871; exile in the USA after a bounty was put on his head for Scott's execution (1871-76, 78-82); being elected several times to Parliament for the riding of Provencher, despite never being able to take-up his seat (1873-74); incarceration in Québec insane asylums (1876-78); and in the Montana Territory, marriage to Marguerite Monet *dite* Belehumeur (1882), fatherhood – Jean and Angelique were born in 1882 and 1883 respectively, working with the Republican Party, serving as a special deputy, teaching school and becoming an American citizen (1883). Then on June 5, 1884, Riel came to the NWT, Saskatchewan District to once again fight for his peoples' rights.

Louis riel's role in the 1885 cataclysm would have profound consequences, including the socioeconomic and political marginalization of the Métis, the subjugation of the Plains' First Nations, the preparation of the region for agrarian settlement and English and French Canada's first rift in Confederation. Through the summer of 1884, Riel tried to build consensus among the English and French Métis, Euro-Canadian settlers and First Nations, in order to address their many grievances against the federal government,

including Ottawa's failure to recognize the Métis' land tenure, honour First Nations' treaties and prevent starvation on the reserves, and in not providing Euro-Canadians with proper political representation, agricultural markets and transportation infrastructure. However, this nascent coalition dissolved due to the federal government's divide-and-conquer strategy, and with the First Nations', Euro-Canadians' and English Métis' reluctance to take up arms. Thus, Riel and his adjutant, Gabriel Dumont, could rely on less than 250 Metis in their struggle with the Canadian state. After two brief guerilla skirmishes at Duck Lake (March 26) and Tourond's Coulee (April 24), and a final entrenched battle at Batoche (May 9-12), the Métis resistance ended. Riel surrendered and was prepared to defend himself and the Métis cause at trial. However, the trial was unfair: the venue and the jurors were all Anglophone and Protestant and the judge had close ties to the ruling conservatives. Riel would hang despite the jury's plea for mercy. Lucid and articulate in the defence of his sanity, Louis riel went to the gibbet knowing that posterity would rehabilitate him and his beloved *métis canadien*.

Louis riel's legacy has been profound. No figure in Canadian history has been more analyzed, has had more differing interpretations or has been more controversial. For the Métis and for many others, riel was a valiant leader who not only martyred himself for his people, but was also a visionary and humanitarian, who saw the potential of the Prairie West as a place where the worlds' oppressed could live in harmony. For other, now in the minority, riel was a madman, a deluded prophet, an apostate and grafter, who inflamed passions and almost tore the country asunder. In addition, Riel's voice has been appropriated for various political ends by Prairie regionalists, Québec nationalists and English-Canadians, conscious of the culpability of their ancestors in his death. Recently, however, Riel has largely been viewed as a victim of English-Canadian intolerance. In 1988, for instance, an exoneration bill, *Bill C-417*, was introduced in Parliament before dying on the floor. The bill was a cause célèbre – a debate, which continued with the CBC's and Dominion Institute's efforts to retry Riel in 2002, without Métis participation. It is significant that the third Monday in February has now been declared a Manitoba holiday – Riel Day – after, Manitoba schools were invited to name Manitoba's newest holiday. In spite of this, .Louis Riel may continue to haunt Canada as long as there are conflicting visions of our common past.



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