

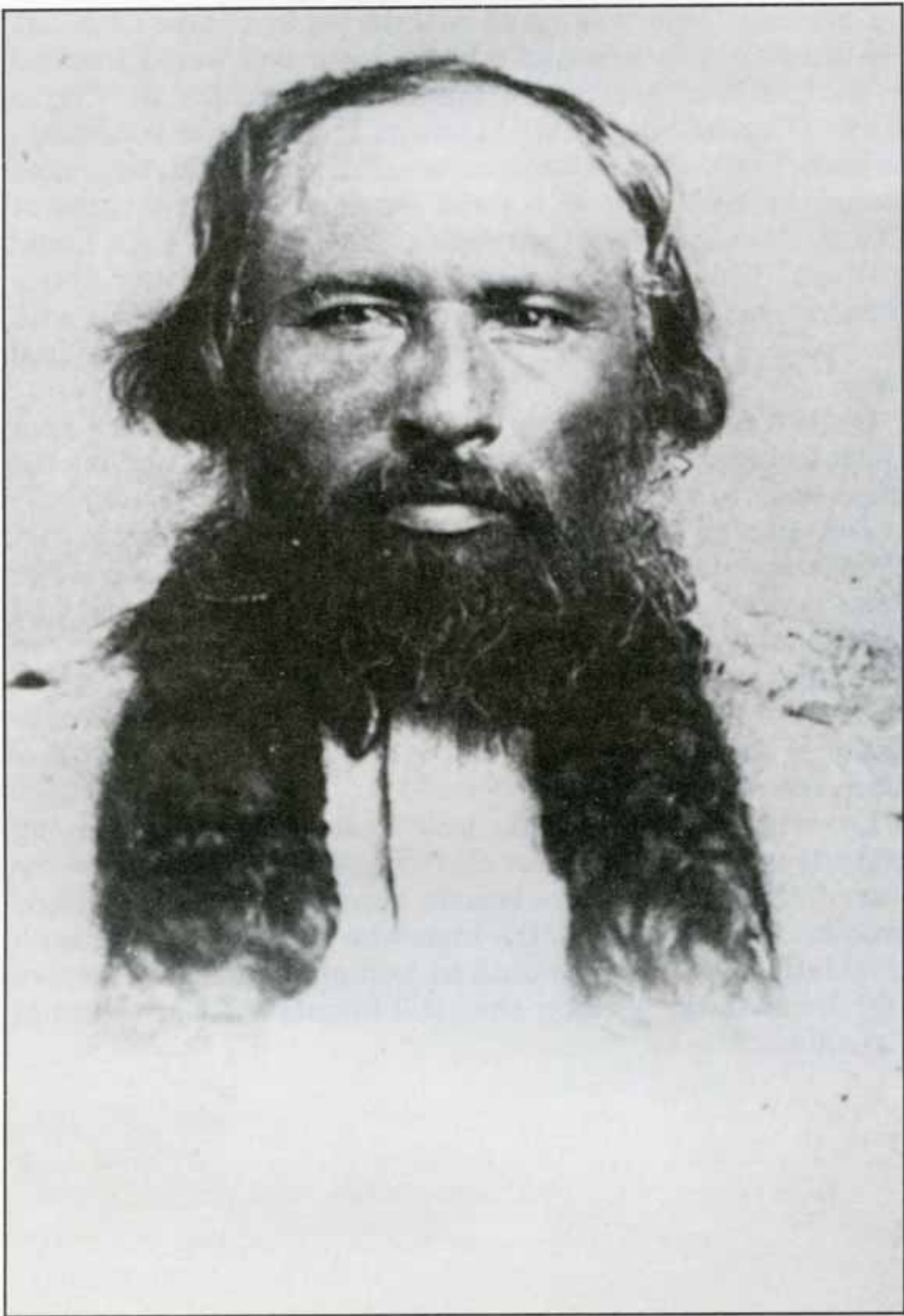
Lawrence Clarke was not to be thwarted by Crozier's caution. He knew that Crozier had a bad temper and would respond in an irrational manner to taunts of cowardice. So Clarke tricked Crozier into taking his corps of police and volunteers to Duck Lake, where a large contingent of armed Metis waited under the leadership of Gabriel Dumont. Clarke shouted at Crozier, "Go and teach the rebels a lesson if you are not afraid of them." The charge of cowardice was too much for Major Crozier. On the morning of March 26, 1885, he rode out with his police and volunteers to Duck Lake, into a well-devised trap.

Riel's original intention was to surround the police near Duck Lake and take them prisoner. But Crozier was far too impetuous to give up without a fight.

The opening battle of the war was a Metis victory. It cost Crozier heavily in dead and wounded. And it cost the Metis even more. It created so much misunderstanding and bad feeling between the Metis and other Canadians that a hundred years have not erased all the damage.

Lawrence Clarke did not live long enough to derive the financial benefits he expected from the war. He died five years after the war, on October 8, 1890.

Lawrence Clarke's actions still create controversy among historians who are aware of his role as the *provocateur* of the war of 1885. His motives remain a mystery, but his actions are not. Clearly, he was the man who agitated among both the Metis and the police until he brought on an unnecessary and divisive war – a war that still haunts the conscience of Canadians.



Gabriel Dumont, Métis Leader.
Photo credit: Montana Historical Society.



GABRIEL DUMONT: A CANADIAN HERO

CANADA is a country rich in the traditions of co-operation and selfless heroism. Most of our heroes, however, remain unsung and largely unknown. Dr. Norman Bethune and Gabriel Dumont are two such unsung heroes. If Canadians were more chauvinistic, such men as Dumont and Bethune would be known to every man, woman and child in the nation. While we should take pride in the fact that we are a racially tolerant people with a relatively unmilitaristic approach to life, Canadian children should nevertheless be introduced to such men as Bethune and Dumont. The story of Dr. Norman Bethune, who gave his life in the Chinese struggle for freedom, must wait for another time to be told. Norman Bethune is remembered and revered in the China that he helped to set free. Gabriel Dumont's exploits, however, are not known widely either in Canada or abroad.

Gabriel Dumont was born on the prairie south of Red River in 1837. He was the third child of Isidore and Louise Dumont. In all, there were nine children in this Metis family. Isidore Dumont was a French-Canadian, and his wife, whose maiden name was Laframboise, was a Sarcee Indian of the Blackfoot confederacy. The Dumont family were renowned as great hunters. Isidore Dumont and his brothers had achieved leadership positions among the buffalo hunters of White Horse Plains, a Metis settlement located a few kilometers west of Red River.

The Dumont family was involved in the Battle of the Grand

Coteau in 1851, in which a large number of Sioux were defeated by a small hunting party of Metis. At age 14 Gabriel Dumont took part in this battle, where he proved his courage in action against the formidable Sioux.

In the years immediately following the battle, Gabriel became well known as an expert marksman and a highly skilled horseman. Already a bit of a legend at age 18, Gabriel nevertheless remained a modest and generous youth. Young Dumont's legend continued to grow as he distinguished himself as a buffalo hunter, and as a fearless warrior allied to the Plains Cree in their wars against the Blackfoot Indians of the western plains.

Before he was 25, Gabriel was known for his courage from Red River to the foothills of the Rockies. Dumont was described by those who knew him as a "tough, resourceful and rather ruthless young man who combined loyalty and good sense with generosity, and a surprising gentleness towards the young and the unfortunate."

Although Gabriel was widely known for his courage and bravado in battle, he also earned a reputation as a diplomat. He and his clan were responsible for making some important peace treaties between the Sioux and the Blackfoot Indians. He was uniquely suited to this task since he spoke both languages.

Gabriel Dumont spoke six Indian languages fluently. He also spoke French, but had no interest in learning English, and never learned more than a few words of that language. Despite his facility with languages, he never learned to read or write. But these were skills that were not always held in esteem by the Metis of the plains during the heyday of the great buffalo hunts.

In 1858, Gabriel married a Scots Metis named Madeleine Wilkie, the daughter of a fur trader at Fort Ellice, about one hundred kilometers northwest of Red River. Gabriel and Madeleine remained childless all their lives. A bout with smallpox when she was a child left Madeleine incapable of having children. The couple became the adoptive parents of many

children, however, and they were known far and wide for their kindness.

Following the tradition of great Native hunters, Gabriel became a member of a benevolent society known as the Society of the Generous Ones. These great hunters took it upon themselves to see that the aged, the sick and the crippled received sustenance from the buffalo hunt along with the hunters and their families. At each hunt, Gabriel would make an extra pass through the herd, dedicating the beasts he slaughtered to those who were under his care. This was an example that Gabriel set for the young hunters, and he expected the other good hunters to follow it as well.

In 1861, Gabriel's father, Isidore, and his uncle, Jean, made a lasting peace treaty between the Metis and the Sioux Indians. Gabriel attended this important event, learning further skills of diplomacy in the process. In 1863, Gabriel took over the leadership position of his father. He was elected as the leader of the Saskatchewan buffalo hunt, a position he was to hold for most of his life. In 1868, Gabriel established the winter camp of the buffalo hunters at the future site of St. Laurent, near the Hudson's Bay Company's Fort Carlton. Here, he met a tough Breton-French priest named Father André. Dumont was so impressed with André's strength and character that they became life-long friends.

In 1870, Dumont, in charge of a band of some 500 Metis hunters, met Louis Riel for the first time. Dumont, having heard about Riel's Red River resistance, travelled to Red River to offer Riel his support. However, Riel did not call upon the hunters to intervene in his political struggle with the federal government. After 1870, Gabriel Dumont settled down in the Metis community of St. Laurent, where he was elected as the community leader. It was here that Dumont and the Metis council for the village of St. Laurent drew up the only set of Metis laws that were ever recorded in written form. Known as the Laws of St. Laurent, the document defined both civil and criminal offences, and established standard punishments for their infraction.

Dumont achieved most of his fame (or notoriety, depending on the bias of the historian) as the Adjutant General in the



DUCK LAKE

IT WAS LATE IN MARCH OF 1885. The sun had been shining brightly and the snow was melting rapidly, creating poor travelling conditions for the fifty-six regular police and the forty-three civilian volunteers on their way from Prince Albert to Fort Carlton. Under the command of Major L. N. F. Crozier, this small force had been quickly mobilized to protect Fort Carlton in the event of an Indian and Metis uprising.

They were camped for lunch halfway to their destination, when Major Crozier, impatient with the undisciplined volunteers, insisted on posting guards at each end of the column. This was done more as a measure of military propriety than for reasons of safety, since it was known that Dumont's Metis militia were miles away, near Duck Lake. Crozier wanted to instill some discipline into his devil-may-care contingent of civilian volunteers. He had a premonition that it was going to be needed.

Young William Napier, originally a citizen of Edinburgh, Scotland, now a Prince Albert man, was one of those chosen to stand guard while his companions rested and quietly enjoyed their noon meal. He was standing around daydreaming when Major Crozier suddenly rode up to him, his blue eyes flashing with anger. He dismounted, and standing ramrod stiff in front of the slouching Napier, he demanded of the overawed young volunteer, "Well, make your report. What have you seen?" Crozier stood there, resplendent in his crimson uniform, impatient for a reply.



Major L.N.F. Crozier.

Photo credit: Glenbow Archives, Calgary.

“Well, Sir,” muttered William Napier, “I saw a rabbit back there.”

“A rabbit?” repeated the incredulous Crozier, as he took a step backwards – and fell headlong into a large pothole filled with muddy ice water. The Major quickly got up, red faced, shook himself like an angry dog, silently mounted, and trotted away with as much dignity as he could muster. Although the entire troop watched this incident, no one laughed out loud. Crozier’s bad temper was as widely known as was his courageous and impetuous nature.

The next day the volunteers celebrated their arrival at Fort Carlton. Whiskey tumblers were emptied, and the tale of Crozier’s hapless encounter with the mud hole was told and re-told between guffaws and belly laughs. But the good times soon ended. The next morning the temperamental March weather turned bitterly cold.

The morning of March 26 dawned through a haze of ice crystals. The volunteers, who had been shaken from their bunks hours earlier, were still suffering the effects of last night’s whiskey. Unaware of the fate that awaited them, they remained confident that they would soon be home. They looked upon this whole adventure as nothing more than a lark. All that was needed was to show the Metis the Queen’s scarlet. This, with the help of the volunteers, would bring the Metis to their senses.

The Metis in the communities along the South Saskatchewan had been awaiting a police attack ever since March 18, when Lawrence Clarke lied to Gabriel Dumont, indicating that 500 police were on their way north to capture the Metis leaders. Gabriel Dumont had wasted no time following his meeting with Clarke that day. He organized raiding parties who travelled through the settlements confiscating food, ammunition – anything that might be used by his militia against the anticipated attack of the police.

The morning of March 26 was a busy one for everyone in the vicinity of Duck Lake. Hilliard Mitchell, the store owner at Duck Lake, packed all his supplies of ammunition into a

sleigh, covered it with hay, and set out for Fort Carlton. In the meantime, both Dumont's militia and a detachment of police were moving towards Duck Lake with the intention of confiscating Mitchell's supply of ammunition. These two forces collided about eleven kilometres south of Fort Carlton. The police, led by a civilian scout named Thomas McKay, a brother-in-law of Lawrence Clarke, were badly outnumbered.

The situation was extremely tense. The Metis were led by Gabriel Dumont who knew Thomas McKay and felt that he was responsible for some of the militant action being taken by the police. Weapons were drawn by both sides. Dumont and McKay exchanged angry words. Dumont fired a well-aimed shot, knocking McKay's fur hat off his head. The police, who were surrounded, did not return the fire. Two police scouts made a break for it, and made it safely back to Fort Carlton, where they reported the plight of the police detachment to Major Crozier.

Crozier was in a quandary. He was aware that his commanding officer, Colonel Irvine, was coming north with a troop of over one hundred reinforcements. He knew it would be hazardous to set out with his small force of less than a hundred men, but honour demanded that he go to the rescue of the detachment now in Dumont's hands.

Dumont, however, had not wanted to precipitate a shooting war. So he had given Thomas McKay and the police detachment an ultimatum: "Return to Carlton at once, or surrender." The detachment returned to Fort Carlton, meeting Crozier's force of police and volunteers who were just setting out to find them. At this point, Crozier had nothing to gain by aggressive action. He decided to stay in the fort until Irvine's reinforcements arrived.

Then Lawrence Clarke intervened, insinuating that Major Crozier was a coward, and urging him to go to Duck Lake and "teach the rebels a lesson." Clarke made this statement loudly, in front of the assembled police and volunteers. Crozier's response was typical of the man. His face reddened with anger. He ordered his troops to mount up. In high spirits, they moved out for Duck Lake.

The column left the fort, preceded by police scouts James Macdonald and Alexander Stewart. Following the scouts at some three hundred yards distance was the advance guard of mounted police regulars. Then came the volunteers, packed tightly into sleighs that were pulled through the deep, heavily crusted snow by puffing, floundering horses.

The trail wound in and out among barren bluffs of trees, and through the extensively wooded areas between Fort Carlton and Duck Lake. It was ideal country for a guerilla army on the defensive. Despite his anger, Crozier, along with Scouts Macdonald and Stewart, was on the alert for an ambush. In the meantime, Dumont was busy preparing just such an ambush as Crozier feared.

Dumont's scouts had given him ample warning concerning Crozier's approach. They knew he had a small force, consisting of just under a hundred men. Dumont selected the best location along the trail for an ambush. If he was to be successful in capturing Crozier's force, as Riel had ordered, this was the ideal place. Here the trail wound through a cul-de-sac surrounded on three sides with shrubbery which would afford excellent cover for his Metis militia. As an added bonus for the defenders, a log cabin was located at the edge of the shrubbery, close to the spot where the trail entered the cul-de-sac. Snipers firing from the cabin could control the only escape route, if only Crozier could be lured far enough into the trap before firing commenced. Here Dumont's men waited silently, while Louis Riel, his crucifix clutched firmly to his chest, prayed interminably.

When Crozier's advance guard swung around a heavily wooded bend in the trail, they saw Macdonald and Stewart riding hard towards them. They were being pursued by a dozen mounted Indians. Crozier realized that his force was caught in a position of the utmost disadvantage. He ordered the front sleighs to move forward, slightly to the right of the trail. He then ordered the six rear sleighs to be advanced to the forward position. They were quickly drawn across the trail, at right angles to it, forming a makeshift barricade. The horses were

detached from the sleighs and taken to the rear. The Metis, hidden in the shrubbery, had not been sighted by Crozier's scouts. Crozier, anticipating heavy fire from the right (he could see the cabin) ordered the volunteers to form a skirmish line on the right, facing the cabin.

This line of men had no cover whatsoever. Furthermore, the snow was so deep that they could not move about easily. Nor could they fire from a prone position. They would have to fire from either a kneeling or a standing position, which made them easy targets. The cannon was brought forward and placed behind the line of sleighs.

From the far end of the snow-covered opening, three Natives emerged, indicating that they wanted to parley. Crozier and his interpreter, Joseph McKay, advanced on horseback to meet these men. One was an aged Cree named Assiyiwan. He came forward on foot. He was followed by two mounted men. One was Gabriel Dumont's brother, Isidore; the other was an Indian compatriot. Crozier directed his questions to Assiyiwan, enquiring as to why the Natives were armed.

When Joe McKay interpreted this question into Cree, Assiyiwan turned the question back on McKay: "Who are you, grandson, and why do you carry so many guns?" While this discussion was going on, Crozier noticed men moving along the far side of the shrubbery on both sides of his force of police. They were cutting off his line of retreat. "Tell those men to go back," he shouted. Assiyiwan made a lunge for McKay's rifle. He and McKay wrestled for the weapon while Isidore Dumont covered McKay with his rifle. Crozier waited a few more seconds, then he gave the order to fire.

McKay released the rifle, letting the old Cree take possession of it. He whipped out his revolver and shot Isidore Dumont out of the saddle. He fired again, hitting Assiyiwan. Then he and Crozier wheeled and raced back to the line of sleighs as bullets zipped and ricocheted past them. One bullet struck Crozier on the cheek just as he was dismounting.

A brisk fire came from the log cabin and from the shrubbery on two sides of the police and volunteers. The volunteers

manning the skirmish line were falling fast, reddening the snow with their blood.

The cannon was unlimbered, but the gunners were exposed to fire from two sides and they fell rapidly. Three dead and two seriously wounded men piled up at the breech of the cannon. Then two rounds were fired, missing the log house. The untrained volunteers rammed home a shell into the barrel of the cannon before the charge of powder was put in. This mistake rendered the cannon useless, and ended any hope of dislodging the snipers from the cabin..

Throughout the battle Gabriel Dumont continually exposed himself to police fire as he moved about directing his militiamen. His bravery was matched by that of Louis Riel. Riel refused to fire a weapon. Mounted on his horse, Riel rode back and forth, holding high his crucifix. Suddenly, he pulled his horse to stop. He saw Dumont fall, with blood pouring from his head.

Stunned and half blinded, Dumont continued to fire at the enemy. Dumont's brother Edouard, seeing Gabriel's dangerously exposed circumstance, rushed forward to drag him back to safety. But the Metis, fearing that Gabriel Dumont might be dying, began to falter. Seeing this, Dumont stood up and shouted, "Courage. When you do not lose your head you do not die." The Metis renewed their attack and the police began to fall back.

Under a hail of bullets, the police and volunteers retreated. They caught the horses and, still under heavy fire, hooked them back up to the sleighs. They moved out, leaving the dead and some wounded volunteers lying in the snow behind them. Young William Napier, mortally wounded, muttered to his companions who had to abandon him, "Tell my mother I died like a man."

In fact, the entire column of police and volunteers were now at the mercy of Dumont's force. Dumont made ready to pursue and destroy them but Louis Riel, sickened by the carnage, rode out in front crying, "For God's sake kill no more of them." The battle of Duck Lake was over. It had been a resounding victory for Gabriel Dumont's force.

The Metis were left with only five dead in all. This included Isidore Dumont and Assiyiwan, who had been killed by Joseph McKay in the opening seconds of the battle. Nine volunteers and three regular police officers were killed, and twenty-five others were wounded. The war that Lawrence Clarke wanted had finally commenced. But it was not at all as he had imagined. Some of his closest friends lay in the snow behind the retreating police.

That night the Metis gave thanks to their God for having such a leader as Dumont. His wound was not fatal and he would soon lead them again. Then they buried their dead. Riel sent word to Crozier that his men would not be molested if the police came to retrieve their dead from the battleground. Thomas Eastwood Jackson, who did not fear the Metis, accomplished this gruesome task. He hauled the bodies back to Prince Albert for burial. Then the citizens of Prince Albert, like their Metis opponents, prayed to their God and mourned their dead.



THE BATTLE AT TOUROND'S COULEE

CANADIAN TROOPS ARRIVE

On the morning of March 25, 1885, one day prior to the opening of armed hostilities in the North West, the Winnipeg militia had begun its trek northward to do battle with the Metis. By March 30, after the news of Duck Lake reached Ottawa, five thousand troops recruited from the Maritimes, Quebec and Ontario were lined up at railway stations awaiting passage to the front.

William Cornelius Van Horne, the hard-driving superintendent in charge of Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) construction, was given the task of transporting the troops to the West. Van Horne knew that his company could ingratiate itself to Canadian taxpayers (who had poured millions of dollars into the construction of the CPR) if the railway could move the troops to the West quickly and efficiently.

Although most of the line was completed as far as Winnipeg, there were several unfinished sections in the barren lands of northern Ontario. Nevertheless, Van Horne accepted the difficult task of moving the troops to the West. The troops were hauled over some of the unfinished sections in sleighs. They underwent forced marches across frozen lakes, and at times were forced to ride in open rail cars through the bitter winter weather. Many suffered from frostbite, and two men died of pneumonia, but the CPR got the troops to the scene of the rebellion in the West.



Native Scouts captured before the battle.

Photo credit: The Public Archives of Canada.

These young soldiers were not seasoned veterans. They were new recruits who had left jobs as miners in Nova Scotia, farmers in Quebec, and clerks in Toronto, to don the uniform of Her Majesty's loyal militiamen to put down a Metis rebellion.

The first Canadian troops to reach the troubled Saskatchewan district were detachments from Winnipeg. Prime Minister Macdonald's son, Hugh John, marched in the ranks of the Winnipeg battalion. These soldiers had been told that the Metis were a bloodthirsty lot of rebels, so they were shocked by the gentleness of the people when they first entered the northern Metis communities. Clearly, these people were not savages. Their homes were clean and well kept. The people were deeply religious. Their appearance was comely, their movements graceful, and they had an air of modest dignity that was at once mysterious, yet becoming. For most of the troops it was difficult to perceive these people as enemies.

Nevertheless, a soldier performed his duty.

The Canadians, under the leadership of a British commander named Fred Middleton, borrowed from Britain's experience in dealing with guerilla warfare in India and Africa. Houses had to be destroyed. Crops and food supplies had to be burned. Reluctantly, Canadian troops burned Metis homes to the ground, among them, the modest home of Gabriel and Madeleine Dumont.

By mid-March, the Canadians were on the march to engage the Metis military force reported to be mustering additional strength from their Indian allies at a place called Batoche. The Canadian force was not attuned to the terrain or to the harsh northern climate. Despite deep snow and an absence of roads, the army had to transport everything it needed – food, bedding, tents, hay for the horses, artillery pieces and tons of ammunition. This was a slow moving, cumbersome army in the West. As it lumbered toward Batoche, it had to cross a small stream that ran through a thickly wooded coulee. The stream was known as Fish Creek to the McIntosh family and their English-speaking neighbours who lived on its banks. On the evening of April 23, 1885, the Canadian army was camped only a rifle shot to the south of Fish Creek.

THE METIS ARRIVE AT FISH CREEK

The Metis celebration of their victory at Duck Lake was short-lived. Everyone in the Metis communities knew that retribution would be exacted by the Canadian government for its defeat at Duck Lake. Louis Riel, going against Dumont's advice, insisted that the Metis militia must await the coming of the Canadian forces at Batoche. Riel's efforts to involve the Cree and the Blackfoot Indians had largely failed. Still, Riel would fortify Batoche and, with God's will, the Metis would be victorious in any battle fought there. Dumont wanted to carry out hit-and-run raids against the advancing Canadians, but was restrained by Riel until April 23.

Under Dumont's direction, Batoche and the surrounding acres were turned into an intricate maze of camouflaged

entrenchments and support positions. But the Metis remained desperately short of ammunition. The women brought in old tea chests and other domestic articles containing lead. This material was melted down and ammunition was made from it for the smoothbore weapons of the older hunters.

By April 23, Riel knew that he could contain Dumont no longer. At dusk, Gabriel Dumont and two hundred men, including some Cree, a large contingent of Sioux, and Saulteux and Metis warriors, set out from Batoche towards the advancing Canadian army. They had only travelled a few miles when they met Noel Champagne and Moise Carriere, who passed on the news that the Canadians were coming by the Qu'Appelle road to take Batoche. Dumont sent fifty men back to Batoche to guard Riel, and the rest went forward to meet the Canadian troops.

At 4 a.m., Dumont and a companion named Napoleon Nault left the main party to reconnoitre the enemy camp. They returned just before dawn. They estimated the enemy's numbers at about eight hundred. This force would be attempting to pass through Tourond's Coulee (known to the English as Fish Creek) shortly after daybreak. Dumont and his men ate a hurried breakfast and moved into the coulee.

Dumont deployed a hundred and thirty men in a hollow that ran along the west bank of the creek. The remaining twenty men were mounted, and the rest of the horses were hidden deeper in the woods. Although the Metis did not have time to dig trenches, they were in position to ambush a large portion of Middleton's army provided that they remained undetected.

Canadian scouts advancing several hundred yards ahead of the army noticed the fresh tracks left by the horses of the Metis as they had entered the coulee. They warned the advance guard, who halted to await the arrival of the main contingent. A Canadian scout entered the coulee to investigate. Dumont shot him. However, this warned the Canadians, and they did not enter the coulee as Dumont had hoped. Had they done so, hundreds might have been annihilated.

When Dumont returned from his joust with the Canadian

scout, he found a large number of his Indian allies had deserted him. Only sixty-two faithful troops were left behind to do battle with Middleton's army. Then the cannons commenced their barrage, making a fearful noise as the missiles screamed overhead, exploding far to the rear of the Metis.

The advancing Canadian infantry made easy targets for the Metis firing from the protection of the underbrush. The Canadian troops were silhouetted against the sky as they came over the brow of the hill leading into the coulee. They were led by a rash young officer walking boldly in a fully upright position. Dumont shot him. He fell, and began to cry fitfully in pain. The Metis laughed and taunted him until he died. This so enraged the Canadian troops that some of them, throwing caution to the wind, came on boldly. They were easy targets and were soon cut down.

The battle raged on all morning. In the early afternoon, Dumont went forward under heavy rifle fire and set the grass ablaze. The fire and smoke, blowing into the faces of the dismayed Canadian troops, further reduced the accuracy of their fire. These untrained Canadians showed some spunk despite the Metis advantage of cover. A fourteen year old bugle boy, typifying the Canadian troops' courage that day, carried ammunition to the troops all day, exposing himself to enemy fire as a matter of routine.

By 8 o'clock that night, Dumont knew that he could do no more. His militiamen had delivered more than any leader had a right to expect of them. The Metis were demoralized by the cold rain that had drenched them all afternoon. They were cold and hungry, and nearing exhaustion. But Middleton's army, vastly superior in numbers, had been stopped at Tourond's Coulee by a handful of men skillfully deployed. Dumont knew that his guerilla tactics could work. It was now time to retreat to Batoche.

Finally, long after dark, eighty Metis horsemen arrived from Batoche. They were too late to engage in the battle, but they assisted their exhausted compatriots in making good their retreat. Dumont's men returned triumphant to the village.

Dumont had lost only four men, two Sioux warriors and his nephews, Victor St. Pierre and Jose Vermette. Two others were wounded, and one of them died the next day. Canadian losses were much higher, with a total of nine dead, and over forty wounded. General Middleton and his Canadian troops had seen their first action against Dumont's militia. Hugh John Macdonald lay among the Canadian wounded that night. Everyone, including Prime Minister Macdonald, learned that this war in the West was not going to be a picnic.



BATOCHÉ

BATOCHÉ. The name is so intricately associated with the Metis that for many the terms are thought of as interchangeable. Batoche. Metis politicians and patriots say the name with reverence. Parks Canada restored the church at Batoche, and it now offers tours through the village, nestled a few yards from the Saskatchewan River. Here, on the bank of the river, Gabriel Dumont is buried, and beside him, in a mass grave, are the Metis patriots who died fighting Canadian troops at Batoche just over a hundred years ago.

The church, once riddled with bullet holes fired from a gatling gun, now sits sedately under the arch of the magnificent prairie sky. A picture of the sacred heart of Jesus, encased in an ornate gold-coloured frame, dominates the interior of the little church. And the church still dominates Batoche. It remains, silent, unused except as an artifact of the Metis past. All else is gone from the original village of Batoche.

Other reminders of the French-Catholic connections to the Metis past are found in the names of the Metis living near Batoche. But even among these people, English is now the dominant language. *Michif* – the original language of the Metis, a mixture of Cree and French – is still spoken by a small number of aged people living in the Batoche region.

Although the village of Batoche is now only a historical site, it is much more than a tourist attraction. It is a shrine to the Metis nation of one hundred years ago. It stands as an inspirational monument for Metis nationalists today. For it

was here that the humble of the earth challenged the mighty; it was here that the unsophisticated Metis people of the prairie stood firm against the push of the British Empire, and dealt some severe blows to Her Majesty's troops before being vanquished and silenced.

THE BATTLE

On the morning of May 9, 1885, General F. Middleton's army of 724 officers and men faced about 300 Metis defenders at Batoche. Middleton's troops were supported with field artillery and a hand-cranked, rapid-firing machine gun mounted on wheels. Known as the gatling gun, this monstrous invention was manned by an American army Lieutenant, Arthur L. Howard of the Connecticut National Guard. Howard transported this gun all the way to Batoche in order to try it out on human targets.

The Metis, well prepared by Gabriel Dumont for the defense of Batoche, were concealed in a network of camouflaged trenches and rifle pits. Despite this advantage the Metis situation was desperate. Badly outnumbered and out-gunned, they were so short of ammunition that scrap metal, even pebbles, would have to be fired from the ancient smoothbore weapons used by many of them. Nevertheless, the morale of the Metis was good.

The Canadian troops at Batoche were still moping over the humiliating beating given them at Fish Creek by an enemy force known to be much smaller than their own. Their morale was further damaged by General Middleton, who scorned his Canadian officers and refused their advice. They suspected he would have traded their entire little amateur army for a battalion of British regulars.

Middleton, however, had an ace up his sleeve – or so he thought. He was going to use a makeshift gunboat, run by a civilian crew, to get behind the Metis lines and catch them in a crossfire. The steamer Northcote had been converted into a makeshift war vessel. Its decks were lined with sandbags. It had one small cannon on board, and fifty riflemen.

The first morning of the battle dawned golden and serene, with the promise of a warm spring day. But the serenity of the countryside was broken shortly after dawn by the jingle and rattle of the artillery horses' harness and gear. Already Middleton's cannon were being hauled into place for the bombardment of Batoche. Then the rattle of gunfire, followed by the futile squeals of the Northcote's little whistle, ended the tranquility of the morning.

The Northcote, in attempting to push far enough up the river to get behind the Metis lines, had entered a narrow part of the river. Metis snipers peppered the steamer with fire from rifles, shotguns and pistols. The pilot, unable to stand up because of enemy fire, lay back and tried to steer from a prone position. The heavy fire from the shore pinned down the riflemen on board as well. From the shore, Gabriel Dumont, astride his prancing horse, directed Metis fire on the Northcote. Bullets riddled the pilot house and ripped splinters of wood from the sides of the ship, but there were no casualties, since the Canadians aboard were flattened below the sandbag barricade. It was only 8 a.m. The battle had started before Middleton was ready. The main body of his army was still six kilometers away.

Dumont's men used the ferry cable to disable the Northcote. As it steamed slowly past a sand bar, the cable was dropped enough to catch the Northcote's twin stacks. They tumbled down, and the steamer caught fire. The troops on board soon extinguished the fire, but the Northcote drifted downstream, out of action for the remainder of the battle. The use of this vessel as a gunboat had been an absurd idea, but it did force the Metis to use up precious ammunition. Indeed, much of their limited supply of ammunition had been expended in the encounter.

The main contingent of Canadian troops reached the village at mid-morning. As they formed ranks at the edge of the village, white handkerchiefs fluttered from the windows of the parish house. The priests, holding high their white handkerchiefs, crossed over to confer with General Middleton.

Embittered by Louis Riel's ostracism of the Church, they disclosed vital information regarding Metis defenses to the general. It is likely that the priests told Middleton about the Metis shortage of ammunition, because Middleton decided to use siege tactics rather than frontal charges. He knew that he could play a waiting game until Metis ammunition ran out.

The limited advances attempted by the Canadians were costly. Whenever the Canadians attempted to advance on the entrenched Metis, they were stopped by accurate fire delivered from skillfully camouflaged pits and trenches.

On the second day of the battle, the cannons and the gatling gun made a terrific din as they opened up on the village, at times obscuring the green May landscape with smoke. The hot cannon balls tore holes in the houses of the village, setting fires as they struck. Despite the noise and clamour, no Metis militiamen were killed by the bombardment. The only casualty was a fourteen year old Metis girl, killed by a stray bullet from the gatling gun.

As he had done previously at Tourond's Coulee, Dumont set fire to the grass at Batoche, and once again the Canadians were blinded by the smoke from a prairie fire while Metis sharpshooters pinned them down. Still, the Canadians came on bravely enough, charging from time to time into the invisible lines of the enemy. Canadian casualties occurred with each charge.

The battle dragged on into its fourth day. Still no Metis had been killed, although the Canadians had suffered dozens of casualties. Middleton's tactic, that of playing for time and winning by siege, was becoming unpopular with his troops. They were still smarting from the previous defeat handed them by their invisible enemies at Duck Lake and Fish Creek. They impatiently awaited orders to storm the Metis lines with a concentrated attack.

Indeed, these men were becoming difficult to restrain. By the morning of the fourth day, the Metis were very low on ammunition. The Canadian troops, without orders, suddenly swooped down on the Metis defences and quickly overwhelmed them. By 3 p.m. it was over.

Batoche had fallen. The village lay in ruins. Riel was soon taken prisoner but Gabriel Dumont, indomitable to the end, escaped.

The guns fell silent late in the day of May 12, 1885. In the silence, the people sorrowed over the loss of their loved ones and more; they sorrowed over the loss of an entire way of life now swept away forever. This silence, pregnant with frustration and a deep feeling of injustice, was not broken for a long time.

Barefoot women and children sifted through the ruins, looking for something to eat. Some hid out in the bush with their men, fearing reprisals. The leaders of the resistance, together with the members of Riel's provincial government, were rounded up and imprisoned until they could be charged with treason and lesser crimes. The dead from both sides were buried.



AFTER BATOCHÉ

WHEN LOUIS RIEL and Gabriel Dumont met for the last time near Batoche with the smoke of battle still lingering in the air, they knew the Metis cause was lost, perhaps forever. Riel, the intellectual, was crestfallen and subdued. He asked of Dumont, "What are we going to do?" Dumont, ever the pragmatist, quietly replied, "We are defeated. We shall perish. But you must have known when we took up arms that we would be beaten. So they will destroy us."

As the two great Metis leaders separated in defeat and despair, they both knew what was expected of them, and they knew what they must do. Riel knew that for him there could be no escape. If there was to be any lasting benefit from the sacrifices made and the misery endured, he had to surrender and stand trial so that at last the Metis case could be heard.

Shortly after his last meeting with Dumont, Riel rode out alone to meet the enemy who were carrying out a massive search for the two of them. He soon encountered two police scouts. Calmly and of his own accord he rode up to them, identified himself, and turned over his only weapon, a small .22 revolver, with the remark, "Perhaps it is better if you have this."

Dumont made good his escape to Montana, where he continued with his attempts to organize support for the Metis of the Canadian North West. Riel was placed under the watchful eyes of General Middleton until he was transported under heavy guard to Regina, where he was imprisoned. On July 6, 1885, Riel was formally charged with high treason. This

was a charge that called for the death penalty upon conviction. The other leaders of the resistance were charged with the lesser crime of treason felony, which did not call for capital punishment. They were imprisoned for a brief period, then released. But Louis Riel was considered too dangerous to be set free.

Riel was tried by Judge Hugh Richardson. The jury, consisting of six men, all Protestants, convicted him on the charge of high treason. The jury, however, recommended clemency. Judge Richardson ignored their plea for mercy and passed the death sentence.

Riel did not receive any more sympathy from some Quebec and Metis nationalists than was given him by Judge Richardson. Philippe Garnot, the secretary of Riel's 1885 provisional government, turned against Riel at his trial, calling him crazy. Father André described Riel as a manipulative, demonic person who only cared about obtaining money and power. Charles Nolin, a Metis who was a former ally of Riel, gave such vindictive testimony against Riel that it weighed heavily in the passing of the death sentence.

During his last days, Riel wrote letters from his prison cell and prayed to his God. He was comforted by an old friend, Father Charles McWilliams, who had studied with Riel years before in Montreal. Riel was comforted by an old enemy, as well. Father André, whose testimony helped to convict Riel, now prayed with him daily in his cell. In the early hours of November 15, 1886, Riel wrote a final letter to his mother. He wrote:

It is two hours past midnight. Good Father André told me this morning to hold myself ready for tomorrow. I listened to him, I obey. I am prepared for everything according to his counsel and his recommendations.

When Riel was led to the scaffold the sheriff asked him if he wished to speak. Riel hesitated – this could have been a last opportunity to spread his message to the people. He glanced at Father André, who urged him to keep silent. Riel then received absolution from the priest and prayed briefly for his family. He calmly mounted the scaffold, and without

flinching, helped put the rope around his neck. "Have courage, Father," he called to Father André, who was dissolved in tears. The trap door was sprung, and the Metis leader passed from life.

The CPR was successfully completed just nine days prior to the execution of Louis Riel in Regina. These two historical events, occurring almost simultaneously, were not entirely unrelated. And they starkly symbolized the ushering in of a new era, and the demise of an old one. The completion of the CPR marked the beginning of a dynamic period of growth for the West. But for the old residents of the West, the Metis, it marked tragedy and a long night of oppression through racism and neglect. The Metis living along the South Saskatchewan River did receive scrip notes after the armed conflict of 1885, but as was the case in Manitoba in 1870, most lost their land to speculators.

As landless people, many of the Metis drifted further to the north, to the marginal bushlands bordering the arctic tundra, where they hoped to scratch out a living as hunters and trappers. Others remained as seasonal labourers for the farmers who were now pouring in from many countries in the Old World.

People from the British Isles, from Scandinavia and Iceland, from Germany, the Ukraine and other European countries made the dangerous ocean crossings and the interminable train rides to the empty prairies of the West. Villages soon began to dot the prairies. Homesteads, cultivated land, fences – private property – replaced the endless miles of wild prairie grasses. Herds of domestic animals grazed quietly where the immense herds of buffalo had once reigned as monarchs of the plains.

Now, like the buffalo and the fur trade, the Metis too were consigned to a bygone era. With the execution of Louis Riel and the dispersion of Metis leadership, the people sank beneath the vision of the country's new masters. They were a people consigned to the wilderness. It would be many years before they reappeared as a unified people, claiming their rightful place in the Canadian Mosaic.



FATHER LACOMBE'S RESERVE

FOLLOWING THE WAR OF 1885, some of the Metis living in the North West Territories (NWT) – now the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta – received scrip notes from the federal government entitling them to 160 acres of open government land. As was the case in Manitoba during the 1870 scrip transactions, the Metis of the NWT did not derive long-term benefits from the government's allotment of scrip. This issue of scrip did not really establish the Metis as productive members of the new wheat economy of the prairies.

The scrip transactions did legally extinguish the land claims of those who received it, but most of these Metis lost their land to the professional land speculators who descended upon them after the war of 1885. Many exchanged their land for reasonable sums of money. Others gave it up for mere trifles, while some Metis people had to let their land go as payment on debts already incurred. However, many people were the victims of fraud.

Clever speculators, taking advantage of the general illiteracy of the western Metis, acquired large tracts of land through the validation of titles that had been made under fictitious names. Others cheated the Metis through the use of written contracts whose clauses could not be understood by the Metis. These written contracts often differed substantially from the verbal interpretation given, thus cheating the illiterate Metis person involved in the deal. From 1885 to the turn of the century, most of the land obtained by the Metis through scrip

passed into the hands of speculators and the banks who, once again, were the real beneficiaries of the scrip process.

The landless Metis were again cast adrift into a strange and alien White world. This time their options were far more restricted than had been the case in 1870. There was no place to turn. The fur trade could only employ a handful of people. The buffalo were gone. The vast prairies, once free and accessible to the hunter and trapper, were now fenced off into private farms and businesses.

The Metis communities along the banks of the South Saskatchewan River deteriorated rapidly after 1885. Some Metis retained their land and became successful farmers, but the majority, who had lost their land obtained through the scrip process, became demoralized. Some took to excessive drinking. Families began to separate. Life became meaningless and depressing. The Catholic faith, which had previously provided a social discipline and a spiritual cohesion for the Metis, could not check the slide into apathy and chaos. Avoided by Whites and Indians alike, the Metis truly became the dispossessed of the Canadian West.

The Metis settlements that had long been established in the territory now known as Alberta did not pass unscathed through the changes that occurred after 1885. However, their isolation tended to preserve their old hunting and trapping way of life for another two decades. The bush communities of Lac Ste Ann and Lac La Biche still existed, and survived on a hunting and trapping economy until the first decade of the twentieth century. In these remote communities, Metis culture continued to survive but poverty-related scourges such as hunger and disease began to take a heavy toll of the people. These tragedies came to the attention of Father Albert Lacombe, a priest of the Oblate order.

This was the same Father Lacombe who had in 1883 negotiated on behalf of the Canadian Pacific Railway with Chief Crowfoot of the Blackfoot confederacy. Father Lacombe, who took up the cause of the landless Metis in 1890, had a trace of Indian blood in his ancestry. Since he was technically a