

Pamphlet # 9

The Métis: Losing the Land

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The Reign of Terror – 1870-1872

Once Confederation occurred, the Métis in Manitoba found themselves in the presence of over 1,000 Canadian militiamen. The Red River Expeditionary Force of 1870 (RREF), the Canadian Party's answer for being outmanoeuvred by the Métis, was nothing less than armed settlers invading what they perceived to be 'their' colony to wrest control over land and politics from the Métis. The actions of the RREF represented a will to violence that had not been seen before in the Canadian West. The ensuing history of Winnipeg in the early 1870s demonstrates how these early Canadian immigrants and their armed force, the RREF, won the West for Ontario. It also demonstrates how Métis unity was destroyed. Intimidation of the Métis in Red River using the Ontario volunteers as the tool to remove Métis influence allowed the Canadians to establish an empire in Rupert's Land.

Organized by the Canadian Government to establish Canadian sovereignty in the Northwest and to maintain law and order, the Red River Expeditionary Force was also determined to wreak vengeance on the Métis for daring to subvert Ontario's intentions for the West. Spurred by inflammatory rhetoric supplied by the Canadian Party and by members of the 'Canada First' Movement, the troops attacked the Métis with impunity. Since the militia was stationed in Fort Garry along with the Dominion Lands

Office, the first Provincial Legislature and other government offices, Métis attempts at being part of the new power system were fraught with danger. Assaults, 'outrages,' murder, arson and assorted acts of mayhem were practiced on the Métis anytime they came near Fort Garry, while the situation in the rest of the Settlement Belt was not much better. The troops remained undisciplined, despite constant attempts by some of their officers to control them. Assaults, which earned six days confined to barracks in Red River, would have been dealt with by flogging and 120 days hard labour elsewhere. Reported in the newspapers in Red River, St. Paul, Toronto and Montreal, the 'reign of terror' in Red River proceeded unabated. During the federal election riots of 1872, mobs incited by 'Orangemen' such as Cornish and Mulvey, invaded the St. Boniface polls with clubs and destroyed the printing presses of those aligned with Métis interests.

When the election riots of 1872 occurred in Winnipeg, the Dominion reacted to the violence of the troops and the other rowdies who had come to Winnipeg after 1870. Threatening and abusing the Métis was one thing but when the 'mob' threatened the state, direct and immediate action had to be taken. In response, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald ordered the military to discipline their people while, at the same time, instructing the civil authorities to control the civilian rioters. Suddenly, the Militia began to receive more normal punishments for their crimes. Unfortunately for the Métis, the systems of government, law, banking and commerce had already been established without much in the way of Métis input. In March of 1873 the English-Métis speaker of the Legislative Assembly, Curtis Bird, was tarred for his opposition to a bill for the incorporation of the Town of Winnipeg. The violence carried on by the mob had successfully hampered Métis ability to interact in the new Province. What was more devastating, however, was that the source of law and order, the Dominion Government, seemed

to be the force opposing Métis participation in Manitoba's development. The same Government also appeared to be acting in an illegal and perverted manner with regard to Métis lands.

Losing the Land, 1870-1880

The Manitoba Act was the result of negotiations between the Peoples of Red River and the Canadian Government. The Act itself was created by the Métis Provisional Government from a 'List of Rights' developed after widespread discussion among the Métis residents of the Settlement Belt. This List was then ratified by all the residents of the Northwest through their delegates to the Convention of Forty. This list then became the basis of the negotiations in Ottawa. Once accepted by all parties, it was again ratified by the Convention of Forty and then passed into law by the Imperial Parliament in London, England. The List, in effect, became the first amendment to the British North America Act, the Constitution of Canada.

The *Manitoba Act* was very specific as to what was promised to the Métis regarding land. Section 32 was supposed to guarantee that all lands held prior to 1870 'according to the custom of the country' would be formalized under Canadian law. Using various interpretations of this clause, Canada successfully prevented most Métis land holdings in the Settlement Belt from being retained by their rightful Métis owners. An Order-in-Council even decided that in the case of a disagreement between an 'old settler' (Métis) and a 'new settler' (Canadian) over land, the Land Office was to decide in favour of the 'new settler.' What makes this particular Order-in-Council perverse is that it was used to settle land arguments in areas where the survey had not yet been completed and arguments over boundaries were to be expected. Much of the Settlement Belt passed into 'new settler' hands in this manner. At the same time, the Dominion Government made it

¹ Adapted from Fred Shore, "The Emergence of the Métis Nation in Manitoba," in L.J. Barkwell, L. Dorion, and D.R. Préfontaine, Editors, *Métis Legacy: A Métis Historiographical and Annotated Bibliography*, Pemmican Publications, 2001.

an almost physical impossibility for the Métis to obtain and keep the 1,400,000 acres of land they had been promised in Section 31 of the *Manitoba Act*. Forbidden by the Constitution from amending the *Manitoba Act*, the Canadian Government nevertheless subverted its provisions by blatantly ignoring the anti-amendment clause. The very Act that should have protected Métis rights was subverted to deny them the land that was rightfully theirs. Combined with the violence endemic to the area around The Forks, the rapidly increasing numbers of Canadian settlers, the land frauds, outright land theft and the rampant uncontrolled and often illegal speculation in Métis lands, the added troubles the Métis had with the *Manitoba Act* were only some of the many reasons why so many of them were leaving the area. If not forced to sell land because of poverty, the Métis were unable to make use of the land due to the refusal of banks to loan them money to begin farming.

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Accessibility



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