

Louis Riel Day

On November 16th, we celebrate Louis Riel Day. Although most of us have heard of him, not everyone remembers why. He has been described as charismatic, a leader, a rebel, a traitor, the Father of Manitoba and even insane. So who is Louis Riel and how did he get his own holiday?

Louis Riel was born in 1844 at the Red River Settlement where he was the first of 11 children, born to a Métis father and French Canadian mother. He was elected president of the provisional government formed during the Red River Resistance of 1869-70, and negotiated Manitoba's entry into Canada in 1871. Louis Riel was elected to Parliament 3 times, but never took his seat. He returned to the Northwest at the request of the Métis during the initial stages of the Northwest Resistance in 1884. Following the defeat of the Métis at Batoche, Riel was tried for treason. His lawyers tried to plead insanity as his defense, but Louis Riel denied those claims. He was found guilty of High Treason in May 1885. Despite the jury recommending leniency, he was sentenced to hang.

During his own life, Riel was recognized as the father of Manitoba and is currently acknowledged to be a founding father of Confederation in Canada. In addition to advocating for Métis rights, Riel also fought for greater religious freedom, French language rights, First Nations rights, and greater gender equality throughout the Northwest. Riel died as a staunch advocate for the Métis and as a defender of minority rights in general.

It is Riel's legacy that continues to attract Métis to remember the ideals and values that he died defending. For that reason, Métis across the homeland commemorate the anniversary of his death, as opposed to the day he was born. It is a day to celebrate the lasting culture and impact that Métis have had on Canadian society. It is a day to recount that Métis have long advocated democracy and freedom of expression for all Canadians. In fact, in one of his trial speeches, Riel prophetically stated that he "will perhaps be one day acknowledged as more than a leader of the half-breeds, and...will have an opportunity of being acknowledged as a leader of good in this great country".



I suppose the half-breeds in Manitoba, in 1870, did not fight for two hundred forty acres of land, but it is to be understood there were two societies who treated together. One was small, but in its smallness it had its rights. The other was great, but in its greatness it had no greater rights than the rights of the small, because the right is the same for everyone.

- Louis Riel