Louis Riel Essay, Research Paper

Riel, Louis (1844-1885)

Louis Riel was born in 1844 in the Red River settlement (now Manitoba). He had French, Irish, and Native American background. He was sent to Montreal to train for the priesthood when he was fourteen, but he never graduated. He attempted training as a lawyer but he never finnished that either. By 1868 Riel was back in the Red River area. Riel became a leader of the Metis of Red River because he was well educated and bilingual. In 1869 when the Canadian government purchased some land from the Hudson’s Bay Company, settlers of French-Native American ancestry in the area rebelled with Louis Riel as the leader. In 1869-1870 he headed a provisional government in Fort Gary, which put together the Manitoba Act with the Canadian government. The Act established Manitoba as a province and provided some protection for French language rights.

Riel’s leadership in the rebellion, especially his decision to execute a Canadian named Thomas Scott, made anti-Catholic and anti-French people of Ontario mad. He was chosen for a seat in the House of Commons three times, but he was unable to take his seat. In 1875, Riel’s role in the death of Scott resulted in his exile from Canada. While he was banned, he began to show signs of megalomania that led to insanity. These years in exile would include stays in two Quebec asylums and the growing belief in Riel that he had a religious mission to lead the Metis people of the Canadian northwest.

He enjoyed the peace in the western United States, where he married and became a US citizen. In 1884, while teaching in Montana at a Jesuit mission, friends convinced him to return to Canada to take charge of the new rebellion. Even with Riel’s help, the government ignored Metis concerns. By March of 1885, Metis patience was running out and a provisional government was declared.The following year he led a wide but unsuccessful rebellion against Canadian rule in Saskatchewan.

Riel was the accepted as the spiritual and political head of the small rebellion in 1885. He never carried weapons and disturbed the work of his military head, Gabriel Dumont. Riel was increasingly influenced by his belief that he was chosen to lead the Metis people. On May 15, shortly after the fall of Batoche, Riel surrendered to Canadian forces and was taken to Regina to stand trial for treason.

At his trial, Riel gave two long speeches which demonstrated his powerful abilities. He personally refused attempts by his defence counsel to prove he was not guilty by reason of insanity. On 1 August 1885, a jury of six English-speaking Protestants found Riel guilty but recommended mercy. Judge Hugh Richardson sentenced him to death. Attempted appeals were dismissed and a special re-examination of Riel’s mental condition by government appointed doctors found him sane. In his last days, Riel was calm and philosophical. He believed in the Roman Catholic religion to his death. He was hanged in Regina on 16 November in 1885. Later generations have accepted Riel as a Canadian hero who fought for the rights of western Canada and for its native people.