

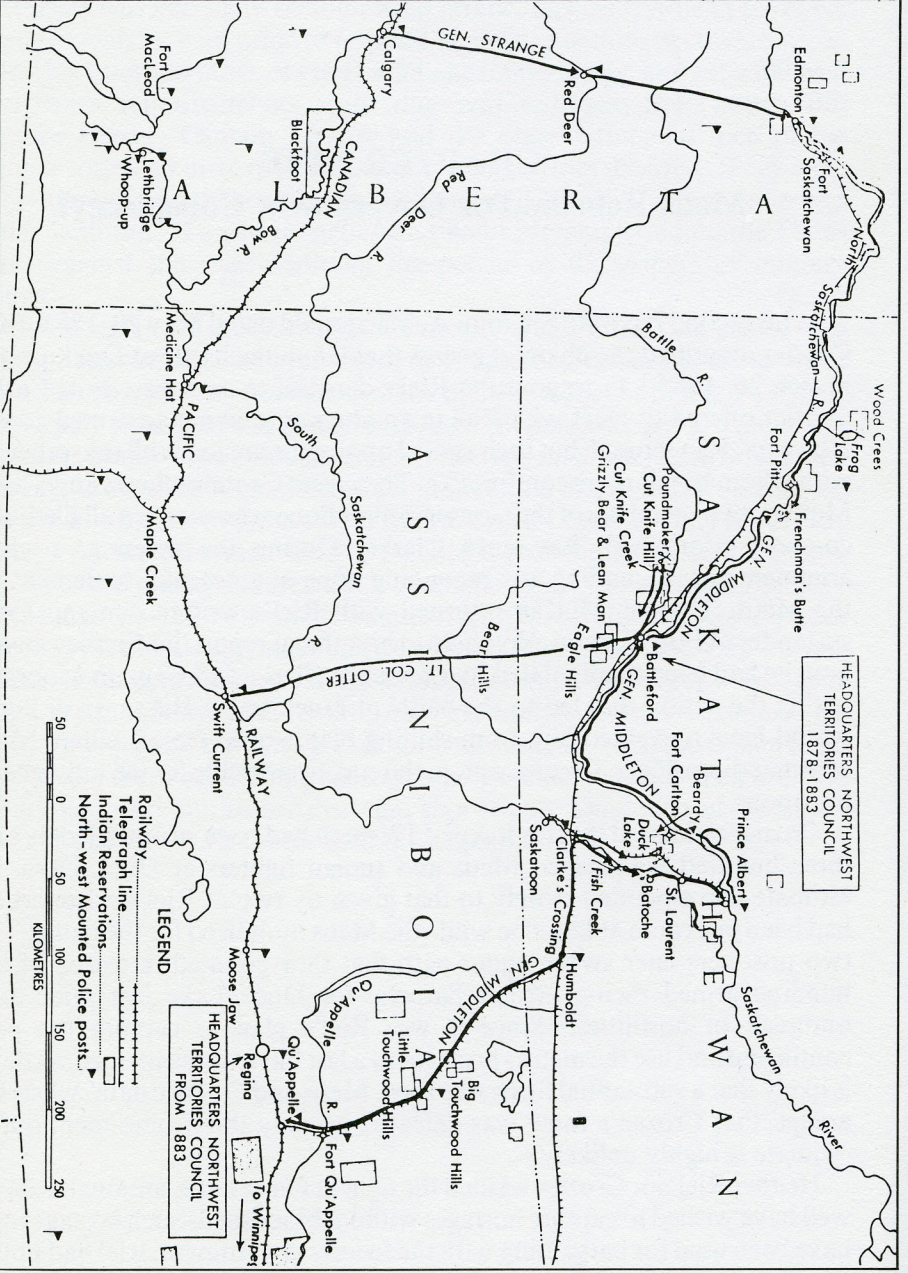
CHAPTER NINE

Metis Rebellion or Government Conspiracy?

In his second report to Sir John A. Macdonald dated May 29, 1885, Major Crozier described the chain of events that led to the battle at Duck Lake on March 26, 1885.¹ In response to Riel's demand to surrender Fort Carlton, Crozier offered to meet with Riel in an attempt to avoid an armed conflict. However, Riel refused, but then agreed upon a discussion with two other men with whom he felt more comfortable. They were Captain Moore and Thomas McKay, two members of the Conservative clique who were, in all likelihood, co-conspirators with Lawrence Clarke. During the meeting, a violent argument ensued, ending any remaining hope of a peaceful settlement with the Metis. Thomas McKay returned with Riel's written demand for the surrender of Fort Carlton. Nowhere in his official report did Crozier mention how he had been manipulated by Lawrence Clarke and Captain Moore into taking the action that led to the battle at Duck Lake. His sense of honour would have prevented him from shifting blame onto these civilians. As the commanding officer, Crozier was, in the end, responsible for the movement of his troops.

Crozier estimated that his force of 120 men had been surrounded by about three hundred well-armed Metis and Indian fighters at Duck Lake. This estimate corresponded closely to that given by two of Riel's prisoners who had been in a cabin at Batoche while the Metis mobilized for the battle. These two prisoners later swore under oath that they counted in excess of three hundred armed men who left Batoche for Duck Lake just prior to the outbreak of hostilities.² Since it was Riel's plan to capture the police contingent and use the men as hostages in a last bid to prevent open warfare, it is likely that a substantial force was used. Metis and Quebec nationalists have argued that Crozier's force was defeated by only thirty-nine men, but this estimate is highly unlikely.³

Neither Riel nor Crozier wanted the fight at Duck Lake, although Riel may well have wished to capture hostages without bloodshed. Such hostages could have been used for bargaining with the federal government. Riel had nothing to gain by an offensive against the vastly superior forces of the Canadian



D. G. Kerr, *Historical Atlas of Canada*, (third revised edition, p. 59) Thomas Nelson & Sons, Don Mills, Ontario, 1975.

North West Territories - the year of 1885.

government, and Crozier had done everything possible to prevent an armed conflict with the Metis. His only rash action, precipitated by taunts of cowardice, had been the return to Duck Lake with his small force when he knew that Irvine would be arriving soon with reinforcements.

Both sides had been manipulated by Lawrence Clarke. Once the clash occurred at Duck Lake there was no turning back for either Riel or Crozier. The hatred generated by that initial conflict ensured that hostilities would continue toward the inevitable bloody defeat of the Metis.

At the battle of Duck Lake, the Prince Albert volunteers were caught in the open under a well-planned cross-fire. They fought fiercely, however, even though they were firing at an invisible enemy. One notably unheroic person that day was Lawrence Clarke, who was at the scene of the battle but was not a combatant. He had been assigned the task of holding the horses during the fight. When he retired from the field of battle, he did so with such haste that he left his racoon coat in the snow. But young William Napier, one of the untrained volunteers, was truly heroic. He was shot through the chest in the opening seconds of the battle. Although mortally wounded, he continued to fire at the invisible enemy. Just before he died, he turned to his comrade and said in a steady voice, "Tell my mother I died like a man on the field of honour."⁴

The Metis, firing from concealed positions at the exposed skirmish line of volunteers, could have annihilated the entire force at Duck Lake, and would have done so had not Louis Riel intervened to stop the slaughter. In the brief fight, lasting just over a half hour, five Metis were killed. The bodies of three policemen and nine volunteers littered the snow of the *cul-de-sac* where they had been ambushed. Twenty-five others had been wounded, nine of them seriously, and of these, three men later died of their wounds.⁵

The bravery of the volunteers was matched by the bravery of the Metis fighters. Gabriel Dumont, wounded in the head during the first hail of gunfire and bleeding profusely, nevertheless continued firing with deadly accuracy. Dumont's incredible bravery inspired even more courage among the Metis fighters. When the police began their retreat, the Metis began an advance. The entire column was now at their mercy. The cry was raised to pursue Crozier's force and destroy it. But Riel intervened, shouting, "For the love of God, kill no more of them."⁶ Riel and Dumont took action to ensure that the wounded soldiers left on the field by the retreating corps would not be harmed. The Metis picked up two wounded soldiers, attended to their wounds, and later returned them to Prince Albert when they were well enough recovered to make the journey.⁷

The news of the Metis victory at Duck Lake swept across the Northwest almost as fast as the messages of defeat were telegraphed to Regina and Ottawa. On April 2, the Crees of Frog Lake rose up and killed Indian agents

and priests, in response to the government's practice of withholding food supplies from hungry people.⁸ Fort Pitt, an HBC post, was also taken.

The federal government's cynical and indefensible manipulation of the peoples of the North West Territories had come to its inevitable conclusion. The war of extermination against the "white man" widened as lone settlers were killed by bands of desperate Indians. The following article in the *Saskatchewan Herald* describes how the Indians, in a state of extreme deprivation, if not of actual starvation, attacked the isolated white settlers of the region:

Thomas Hodson and Louis Flamond left early this morning to bring in the body of Mr. Fremont, and got back about nine o'clock. The body presented a horrible appearance and gave evidence of the depth of fiendishness that marked his murderers. Not satisfied with shooting him twice from behind while he was engaged in greasing his wagon, the fiends inflicted two frightful gashes on his head just above his right ear, fired a bullet through his head after he was dead, the gun being held so close to his head as to burn the skin; and firing an iron-shod arrow into his breast as he laid stretched in death. He died with the wagon wrench in his hand, showing how he had been employed when the first fatal shot was fired.⁹

The tone of the article portrays the depth of hatred created by these killings between the two races. The hysteria generated by the killings, although understandable, was unjustified. The Cree Indians, more often than not, spared the lives of the settlers throughout the conflict. In all, they killed a total of fourteen officials and settlers, despite the fact that they were fighting a war they did not start, for the right to survive in their own homeland.

Terror spread rapidly. Whatever support and sympathy had existed prior to the killings on the part of the European settlers was washed away by the fear of a general Indian uprising. Farmers and settlers evacuated to Prince Albert and Battleford. With every useless death on either side, generations of hatred were born. As the killings increased, the newspapers clamoured for genocidal military action against the Indians. On April 23, 1885, the *Saskatchewan Herald* reported:

It was long ago said to be inevitable, owing to the disappearance of the buffalo from the plains, that the government must either feed the Indians or fight them, and it decided to accept the former alternative . . . Untamed, and untamable, the Indians turned on the hand that fed them with a blind fatuity that seems to say providence has decreed their disappearance and that they should give place to another race, just as the buffalo of the past has given place to domestic cattle.¹⁰

The article concluded: "This gives weight to the old adage that the only good Indians are the dead ones."¹¹ Local people forgot their long-standing grievances with the federal government as they anxiously awaited the coming

of government troops to save them from the terror of the impending "massacre."

In the East, the government had mobilized the militia prior to the actual outbreak of hostilities. Five thousand troops recruited from the Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba awaited transportation to the front in the Northwest. As early as March 25, the Winnipeg militia, with Sir John A. Macdonald's own son among its ranks, had begun its trek to the Northwest. By March 30, troops in the eastern cities were lining up at railway stations awaiting passage to the front while bands played martial music. The Anglo-Canadian population went on a spree of patriotic enthusiasm.

While these innocent recruits waited with patriotic fervour to be moved to the front, William Cornelius Van Horn was making sure that his subordinates were informed that not only the CPR's credit, but perhaps its very existence, depended upon its ability to get the troops transported to the battlefronts of the Northwest.¹² The Canadian troops were shipped from the East to Winnipeg by the CPR despite the fact that there were many unfinished sections of track along the line. The troops were hauled over these sections by horses and sleighs, and at times they simply walked. One way or another the CPR moved the troops with amazing speed to the scene of battle in the West.



National Photography Collection, Public Archives Canada

1885 Northwest Rebellion - In the Qu'Appelle Valley of Saskatchewan, 12th and 35th Regiments, Winnipeg Calvary, York and Simcoe Batteries, en route to Humboldt.

Some troops were forced to ride in open cars through the bitter winter weather. Two men died of pneumonia *en route*, while many others suffered from frostbite. Most arrived in a rundown condition because of the hardships imposed upon them. And these hardships were unnecessary. The troops could have used the American line from the East to Saint Paul, Minnesota, where a line connected directly to Winnipeg.

The CPR was used to transport the troops for political, not military reasons. By transporting the troops to the West to put down the rebellion, the CPR was finally able to justify itself to the Canadian public, who had financed most of its construction. Having ingratiated itself with the Canadian public, a bankrupt CPR would soon call upon the public to finance the remainder of its construction needs.

On the night of April 4, the first eastern battalions of Canadians reached Winnipeg. Less than a week later, with General Middleton in command, the first of three strike columns left Qu'Appelle, marching north through the snow towards Batoche. Van Horn and the CPR had indeed performed miracles.

The Metis, too, were mobilizing a small army to put into the field. This army, however, did not resemble the military units of either their Indian allies or the federal government. The Metis provisional government did not condone murder and pillage and ensured that wounded prisoners were cared for. No civilians were ever murdered by the Metis. All matters pertaining to war and the survival of the people were discussed and resolved in council.¹³ If a Metis family required food, the matter was taken before the council for approval before any settler's stock would be taken.

From the day the Metis provisional government was formed (March 19, 1885) to the day in May 1885, when its members were taken away in chains, it ruled with compassion and justice for all. The council made sure that European prisoners were returned to Prince Albert and made arrangements to return the bodies of the soldiers killed at Duck Lake to their families. They were, of course, as tolerant with their own troops as they were with the enemy's. Although the Metis imposed a rigid discipline upon the men in battle, they relaxed the rules between fights. One particular Metis soldier was allowed to leave the campaign to return home simply to "make my wife make her Easter duty."¹⁴

Riel communicated with his various Indian allies, asking the chiefs to see that no civilians be killed. At the same time, the Metis attempted, as best they could, to share some of their own meagre rations with the Indians.¹⁵

The Canadian troops arriving in Metis country did not behave as well as the Metis did. Following orders, they burned Metis homes and destroyed food supplies. These were tactics that had been developed by the British in India and elsewhere to put down guerilla resistance movements in occupied areas.

The entire population was to be punished in this way, so that dissension and dissatisfaction might be cultivated among the population against the guerilla fighters and the resistance leaders.

When the Canadian troops arrived from the East, some five thousand strong, the Metis, with about three hundred men armed only with smooth-bore weapons and little ammunition, were ill-prepared for war. After the battle of Duck Lake, they did not engage the Canadians again until they met General Middleton's army at Fish Creek on April 24, 1885.

The battle at Fish Creek was decidedly a victory for the Metis.¹⁶ Once again under the brilliant leadership of Gabriel Dumont, a handful of Metis marksmen, firing from concealed positions, took a heavy toll of the Canadian troops. This battle was a serious setback for General Middleton and his raw recruits from eastern Canada. He now felt a new respect for the tenacity, ability and courage of the Metis and became over-cautious, despite the advantage in both weaponry and troops that he had. Not until May 9, 1885, did he once again prepare for a frontal assault on an entrenched Metis position.

During the lull between the battle of Fish Creek and the battle of Batoche, which took place between May 9 and 13, the Metis were hemmed in and isolated from their potential allies, the northern Cree. The Cree had been engaged by a column of troops at Cut Knife Hill on April 30.¹⁷ Just before General Middleton attacked Batoche, where some three hundred poorly equipped Metis were dug in behind well-camouflaged positions, he unwisely split his strike force into two columns, leaving about half his troops on the wrong side of the Saskatchewan River. Nevertheless, on the morning of May 9, his army of some 724 officers and men was in position to strike at the Metis defenders of Batoche.

For the first three days of the battle the Metis patriots harassed the government troops. Their fire was so accurate that at one point they seemed to be on the verge of defeating the Canadians. They were driven back only when Lieutenant Howard, a United States army officer, opened up with a devastating fire from his gatling gun, which had been transported from the United States to be tested on human targets.¹⁸ The battle dragged out to its inevitable conclusion. The outdated weapons and bullets forged on camp fires were no match for rapid-firing machine guns and batteries of field artillery. The Metis were defeated, their leaders were put in chains. All was finished, save the executions and the racial repercussions.

Following his defeat at Batoche, the indomitable Gabriel Dumont escaped to Montana, but Louis Riel quietly, and of his own accord, rode up and turned over his only weapon, a small .22 revolver, to police scouts William Diehl and Robert Armstrong with the remark, "Perhaps it is better if you had this."¹⁹ Riel was sent overland to Regina under heavy police escort where he was detained until his trial and execution in November.