



Saskatchewan Archives Board

1885 Northwest Rebellion - Riel's provisional government in chains.

During this short but brutal war, Canadian and Metis blood had been shed at Duck Lake, Fish Creek and Batoche. Canadians and Indians died and were maimed at Cut Knife Hill, while European priests and government officials had been shot at Frog Lake. A few isolated settlers were killed and their cabins burned in remote districts of the territory. Fort Carlton had been burned to the ground, during the police evacuation; the mystery of how the fire started has never been solved. But the HBC received generous compensation from the federal government for its loss. Battleford had been looted and burned. Many Metis homes had been burned and their food supplies were destroyed by Canadian troops.

During the entire campaign, a total of twenty-two Metis and Indians were killed. Many wounded Metis and Indians fled from the authorities without treatment. It is therefore impossible to estimate the number of Metis and Indians who were wounded in action or died later from their wounds. Canadian casualties were much heavier. Frontal charges against well-selected, camouflaged entrenchments accounted for many Canadian deaths. Forty-five Canadians were killed in action, and three died from pneumonia and exposure. A total of fourteen civilians were killed by various Indian bands, including the nine priests and government officials at Frog Lake. In all, sixty-two Canadians died as a direct result of the rebellion.²⁰

It is not known how many Indian people died at the battle of Cut Knife Hill. It is known, however, that artillery was used against civilians during the encounter.²¹

The cost to the government of suppressing the Metis greatly exceeded the overall cost of Metis land claims, whose prior settlement would have prevented the war. On top of the military costs, estimated at \$5 million, 1,308 war claims, totalling \$2,918,024 were made.²² Thomas McKay was placed in charge of war reparations. His generous payments to the HBC for its loss of Fort Carlton became the material of yet another scandal in the Prince Albert district after 1885.²³

In the aftermath of the war and the execution of Louis Riel, Canada's political face underwent a fundamental transformation. The French Catholics of Quebec were enraged at the Conservative government's handling of the war and at the brutal hanging of Riel. They saw the war as essentially a religious conflict and they remained alienated for generations. Democratic nations around the world, with some degree of hypocrisy, condemned the Canadian government's actions against the Metis.

In the House of Commons, the Liberal opposition demanded answers. Under the cross-questioning of Edward Blake, the government was called upon to explain why it had used troops against the Metis. Why had it not responded to their peaceful petitions? Why had the government concealed the existence of petitions and not informed Parliament about them? Why had

Parliament not been informed of the many Metis petitions that had remained buried in the Department of the Interior for years? Why did the government acknowledge the crisis in the Northwest by sending troops, instead of dealing with Metis land claims, as they had for the Halfbreed and European settlers?

In July 1885, Prime Minister Macdonald, now aged and ailing, rose in Parliament to defend the actions his government had taken in the Northwest prior to, and during, the Metis rebellion of 1885. The prime minister produced a document that he said would justify his government's use of the military to solve the problems in the Northwest. The document was an "unsigned letter," from a resident of the North West Territories. This "unsigned letter," sounded suspiciously similar in tone to the one sent to Lieutenant Governor Morris by Lawrence Clarke in 1875.²⁴

The ultimate justification for the government's initial inaction and its later military intervention, then, rested on the written advice given to the prime minister by an unidentified person in the Northwest. The letter was later positively identified as Lawrence Clarke's by his personal secretary, Joseph Parker.²⁵ Like Clarke's mischievous letter of 1875, it took a circuitous route to its destination. It went from Clarke to the HBC's chief commissioner, Mr. James Graham, and then to the prime minister in Ottawa. The Macdonald government hid Clarke's role in the rebellion and prevented it from being debated in Parliament. In fact, after the rebellion was over, the government dissociated itself publicly from Lawrence Clarke. Gordon Black wrote:

In view of the severe criticism to which Mr. Dewdney and the Ottawa authorities were naturally subjected for not seeing the rebellion, the question arises as to why, in self-defense, no public reference was ever made to Mr. Clarke's share in bringing it about.²⁶

There is no indication that Sir John A. Macdonald or any other member of the government intended to participate in a conspiracy to bring on a Metis rebellion prior to the summer of 1884. But Clarke's letter to the prime minister must have identified him as a man who might be used if such a course became necessary. By June 1884, it must have occurred to government officials in Ottawa that there was a useful alignment of interest between its own need for a rebellion as a means of saving the CPR, and Lawrence Clarke's need for a rebellion as a means of bringing prosperity back to the Northwest.

It is very likely that Lawrence Clarke made a deal with the federal government during his February 1885 trip to Ottawa as an emissary of the Metis. His actions upon his return stand as strong evidence that a conspiracy to provoke a rebellion did occur during that critical meeting. If there is any doubt that the war was created as a means of bringing prosperity to the clique of Conservative speculators in Prince Albert, it should be dispelled by a

statement contained in a letter to the prime minister, dated August 1886, from Henry J. Clarke, former attorney general of Manitoba, who had served under Lieutenant Governor Archibald. Henry J. Clarke (no relation to Lawrence Clarke) had been engaged as a defence lawyer for some of the Metis involved in the 1885 rebellion. Clarke stated:

As you are aware I defended Scott, the white rebel of Prince Albert, and secured his acquittal . . . I also appealed to the court affidavits on behalf of the French halfbreeds who had been forced to plead guilty . . . I know every man of any importance in any way hooked up with the Rebellion, every man who took an open or secret part in goading the ignorant [Metis] into Rebellion, the personal object of every man of any importance in getting up the Rebellion.²⁷

It is not difficult to show that a plot existed and was executed by the “important” people of Prince Albert. But it is difficult to find direct evidence linking the federal government to this plot. We must therefore rely upon inference and *a priori* constructions to build the case against the government.

Scattered throughout archives across Canada are documents that infer government complicity in bringing about the 1885 rebellion. As isolated statements they make little sense. But, in the context of this analysis, these documents do implicate Sir John A. Macdonald and other government officials in the conspiracy to bring about the Metis rebellion.

Joseph Royal, the French Canadian member of Parliament for Provencher, was sent to the Northwest by the prime minister just prior to the rebellion. In April 1885, Royal wrote a letter to Bishop Taché discussing the actions of Sir John A. Macdonald, and lamenting the fate of the French Metis who were suffering as a result of the war. He feared that the commission set up by the federal government to deal with Metis scrip would be of little help to them. In a conversation with Sir David McPherson, Joseph Royal had learned that the government’s intention was to hang Louis Riel. Royal had evidently been privy to information that, if made public, would put Sir John A. Macdonald on trial. Royal informed Taché:

The tendency of the Grits and Liberals at this moment is to capitalize politically on the present revolt: They profit from the extreme sickness which exists in the Party . . . on the causes of insurrection . . . For a storm we are going to have, one which will perhaps be a tempest. Opinion is high, and blames the government for present events. I am surrounded and questioned by our friends from Quebec who are anxious. What must I do? Must I tell all, and put Sir John on trial, which would be very possible.²⁸

This letter indicates that Joseph Royal was extremely distraught about the rebellion. Certainly his reference about putting Sir John on trial implicates the prime minister in some illegal act regarding the initiation of the rebellion.

However, Bishop Taché's advice to Royal was to remain silent and let the storm blow over.²⁹

Other informed people in the West, such as Dr. Schultz, the man who helped to provoke the 1870 conflict in Red River, accused the government of bringing about the war of 1885. An article in the *Saskatchewan Herald*, dated June 8, 1885, stated:

He [Dr. Schultz] later gave notice that he would ask from the Government for a great many documents from which their titles would make it appear the government knew all about the recent Indian rising, if indeed it did not bring it about itself.³⁰

The same issue contained the following comment on Dr. Schultz's charges against the government:

If the Senator from Manitoba knows anything that affords an excuse for the uprising why does he not say so in so many words? If he wants to connect this affair with the "trouble" in Manitoba, let him tell what he knows about its inception, and how it came about that some who were amongst the principal movers in that scheme came to change their views.³¹

The implications are clear. Schultz was charging the government with prior knowledge of the rebellion or an actual conspiracy to create it. The editor, in turn, challenged Schultz to "put up or shut up," implying that he would be wise to remain silent.

Finally, the Marquis of Lansdowne, in a letter to the prime minister, implied the use of unethical tactics on the part of the government in order to obtain political benefits from the rebellion. In response to Macdonald's efforts to downplay the importance of the rebellion as a means of appeasing the people of Quebec, Lansdowne wrote to Macdonald on August 18, 1885:

You regard the recent outbreak in the Northwest as merely "a domestic trouble" which should not be elevated to the rank of a rebellion. The outbreak was no doubt confined to our own territory and may therefore be described as a domestic trouble but I am afraid we have all of us been doing what we could to elevate it to the rank of a rebellion and with so much success that we cannot now reduce it to the rank of a common riot.³²

Lansdowne's remarks suggest that the rebellion was used for Macdonald's own political purposes. The evidence presented here, however, suggests that the rebellion was created by the federal government as a means of making it possible politically to get further funding for the bankrupt CPR.

History has shown that Macdonald had gauged the public mind correctly. After the war was over, he had little difficulty in getting sufficient public funds

to save the company. The 1885 conflict had clearly saved the CPR from financial ruin. It also saved the Conservative government's National Policy, and consequently the government, from certain disaster. The rebellion in fact preserved the young Canadian nation from eventual takeover by the United States. Having saved the National Policy and the CPR, the rebellion laid the foundations for present-day Canada.

If Lawrence Clarke received a financial reward for his part in starting the war, there is no record of it. Perhaps the general prosperity and increased immigration brought about by the war were reward enough.

This war, after all, settled the Indian question. The defeat of the Indians and Metis provided the atmosphere of social stability necessary for investment capital in the North West Territories. Because of his actions in provoking the conflict, Clark's good name did suffer. He became widely known in the region as "the troublemaker who caused the war."³³ Lawrence Clarke did not live long enough to realize the advantages that the war had created for him. He died on October 8, 1890, at the age of 58.³⁴

The CPR was of course the real beneficiary of the war of 1885. Born of a contrived "rebellion," suckled at the breast of a corrupt government, the company grew from a base built upon tax money until, today, it stands as one of Canada's largest corporations.

The government's actions prior to and during the war of 1885 clearly reveal the role of the state in Canada's transition from colony to nation. The government taxed the public to finance the private empire of the CPR. The government used guile, manipulation and military force to create economic monopolies in order to exploit the people of the West. It is unlikely that the government contained its activities within its own legal framework.

Evidence presented here indicates that the state was involved with the local Conservative party investors and speculators of Prince Albert in an effort to create a Metis "rebellion" in the West. By today's standards, these actions were dark and sinister. However, given the limited political consciousness of the nineteenth century, and given the position of the fledgling Canadian state as the administrator and mediator of the needs of the powerful industrialists and bankers, little else could be expected. In this light, Sir John A. Macdonald and his associates were behaving not simply as "corrupt" individuals. As members of the state, they were playing the historical role that was expected of them. Macdonald's government has long since passed into history. Its guilt or innocence in these matters will never be resolved in a court of law. We must weigh the evidence and ourselves be the judge and jury.

Today, Metis land claims are still pending before the courts. Governments still equivocate on the question of Native rights. Today, the Metis are again organizing politically. Trouble may be brewing once more in the West. These are political questions which must be politically addressed. The job of

researchers and historians must be to see that the evidence is unearthed, especially as it applies to those who have remained powerless and silent in the face of a recorded history that has unjustly maligned them.