

There were no telephones or radios here in 1885. The immigrant folk of southwest Manitoba relied on each other for local news and from city newspapers that arrived by horseback. So when rumours started about an armed insurrection to the northwest, it was difficult to gain helpful perspective.

The boom years of Euro-settlement were in the early 1880s. The first two Springs, though, were marked by massive flooding. Then in '83 the economy slowed. Early frosts led to poor harvests. And, promised rail lines were slow in coming. Added to the disappointment; was uncertainty about community policing. The North-West Mounted Police had a small presence at Wakopa only.

Through summer of 1885, area citizens began hearing about Metis and First Nation discontent, in what is now Saskatchewan. Fear spread, of a coordinated Indigenous Peoples' insurrection. A Turtle Mountain resident claimed he was awakened at night by a "big camp of Indigenous warriors". Also, rumour had it, a Gatling gun was to be smuggled over the US border nearby, destined for Louis Riel and his followers at Batoche. Anxiety across settler communities was real.

Hindsight, though, is a good teacher. We now know there was no Gatling gun. And we know, that John A. McDonald's government actively fueled the conflicts of 1885. We also know that the North-West Metis under Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel were impressively patient, petitioning the government for protection against unscrupulous North-West politicians and land speculators. There was good reason for the Metis to mount an armed resistance at Batoche. But, distant citizens had no way of hearing Indigenous perspectives. If they had, McDonald and his clique may have faced more opposition. A devastating battle may have been avoided. Perhaps Louis Riel could have been spared the gallows.

The feds chose to ignore Metis petitions, because they preferred to settle Ontario and European immigrant farmers on square plots of land, and to make their cronies wealthy in the process. The McDonald Government set out to remove the Metis community from their

Saskatchewan River-lot lands, as they had at Red River fifteen years earlier.

The first local newspaper was the Times of Deloraine, beginning two years later, in 1887. Newspapers, if they came at all, came from the Winnipeg based Daily Nor'Wester or the weekly Brandon Mail. And, truth be told, the Nor'Wester was decidedly pro Eastern Canada and dismissive of Indigenous rights and aspirations. So even news that did get through may not have been helpful.

The McDonald government used newspapers of the day to whip up Canadian sentiment against Riel and the Metis; calling the Batoche uprising a "Rebellion". In contrast, the Metis speak of the uprising as a "Resistance"; as they resisted, and still resist, those who deny their right to land and nationhood.

Finally, in 2017, the current Prime Minister commemorated Riel as "a fearless Metis leader . . . defender of minority rights . . . who envisioned and fought for a more diverse and more inclusive country. I encourage everyone" he went on "to honour the Metis people and recognize their many contributions to Canada."

Studying history can make us unlearn what we have learned. Now, at least, we have the information we need.

*North-West Resistance was inspired by a story in Vantage Points 4.*

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