



This photograph of Louis Riel dates from 1879, about nine years after Nathaniel Langford and Robert Cunningham met him.

## Meeting Louis Riel

Louis Riel is one of the most controversial figures in Canadian history. People disagree about him now, and people disagreed about him then.

The following very different impressions of Louis Riel date from the time of the Red River Resistance.

### What Nathaniel Langford Saw

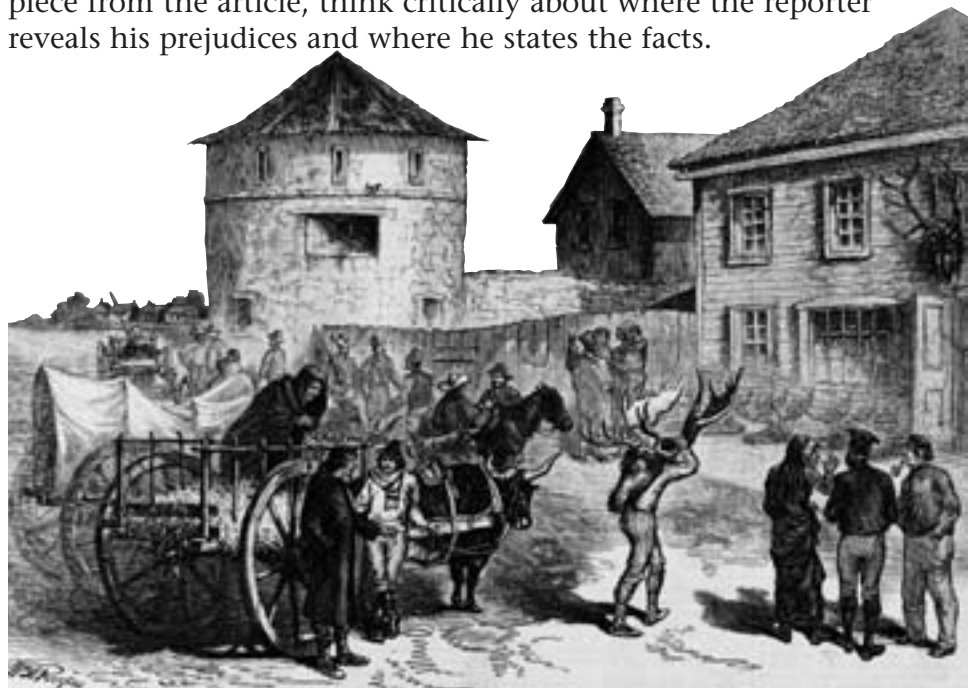
Nathaniel Pitt Langford, an American who visited Red River in 1870, wrote this after meeting Louis Riel:

**Riel is about 28 years of age, has a fine physique, of active temperament, a great worker, and I think is able to endure a great deal. He is a large man... of very winning persuasive manners; and in his whole bearing, energy and ready decision are prominent characteristics; — and in this fact, lies his great powers — for I should not give him credit for great profundity, yet he is sagacious, and I think thoroughly patriotic and no less thoroughly incorruptible.**

— From Lewis H. Thomas, "Louis Riel", *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, University of Toronto, Université Laval and Library and Archives Canada.

### What Robert Cunningham Saw

In January 1870, reporter Robert Cunningham travelled to Red River to meet Louis Riel. The article Robert Cunningham later wrote shows his bias against the Métis leader. It also, however, captures first-hand statements of the Métis people's cause. As you read the following piece from the article, think critically about where the reporter reveals his prejudices and where he states the facts.



Métis volunteers seized Fort Garry, a Hudson's Bay post in the Red River settlement, in November 1869.

The piece begins after Robert Cunningham arrived at Fort Garry, which Métis volunteers had seized in November 1869.

**I was conducted to the guardroom.**

**"Will Monsieur take a seat by the stove?"**

**Monsieur thanked him and sat down by the stove.**

**Monsieur sat a long time by the stove. Eleven, twelve, one, two o'clock, but none of them brought M. le President, Louis Riel. One of the guards took a seat beside him.**

**"Shall I tell Monsieur what we want?" said he, turning to his confreres.**

**"Oui," resounded all around. So my friend resumed, "We want to be treated as free men. Canada's government offered to pay three hundred thousand pounds to the Hudson's Bay Company for the Red River Territory. Now, we want to know what they mean to buy? Is it the land? If so, who gave the Hudson's Bay Company the right to sell the land? When Canada's government bought the land, did it buy what was on it? Did it buy us? Are we the slaves of the Hudson's Bay Company?"**

**"Non!" resounded on all sides.**

**"No, we are not slaves. But remember, and you may tell Canada's people this when you go home, we do not want to kill anyone in this quarrel. We have hurt no one yet, nor do we mean to. Let the Canadian government come and negotiate with us as free men, and we will lay down our arms, and go to our homes."**

**As the hour approached at which I was positively assured the President would appear, I felt somewhat anxious. I had seen some pen and ink sketches of the President, in which he was portrayed as an Alexander or a Napoleon. The prospect of meeting with an Alexander or a Napoleon was surely enough to fluster most men.**

**M. le President:** *Monsieur le Président* means "president" (note that the *Daily Globe* didn't use French accents on French words)

**confrere:** *confrère* means "colleague"

**an Alexander or a Napoleon:** a reference to two famous conquering military leaders in history, Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte



Thousands of people lived in Red River. Nathaniel Langford and Robert Cunningham would have seen well-established settlements, such as this, as they travelled to Fort Garry.

**linen draper's assistant:**

a shop clerk, someone hired  
to wait on customers

Louis Riel was a man of about thirty years of age, about five feet seven inches in height — rather stoutly built. He head was covered with dark, curly hair. He stood gazing at me in the most piercing manner, at least, there is no doubt he thought so. I did my utmost to see in him a Napoleon or an Alexander, but it was a failure. I could not get beyond the fact that there stood before me a **linen draper's assistant**. There could be no mistake about that.

I indicated that the people of Canada were anxious to know all about this Red River affair.

*M. le President* observed that he thought the people of Canada knew all about it already. "Look here, and here, and here," he said, pointing to great blotches of ink on a desk. "Some ink has been used, has it not, in writing facts — what more do you want?" said the Modern Alexander.

I indicated that the people of Canada desired to have the facts of the case laid before them in a plain, honest way.

*M. le President* made no direct reply to this, but struck the desk violently with his hand, and said "we are in the right, we are in the right!" and walked off.

— Adapted from Robert Cunningham, "The North West,"  
*The Daily Globe*, 2 February 1870, page 2.

**RESPOND**

Nathaniel Langford and Robert Cunningham saw Louis Riel in very different ways.

1. Use a graphic organizer to list examples of facts and opinions in each description. Under the organizer, write down the criteria you used to distinguish facts from opinions.
2. In what way does Robert Cunningham portray Louis Riel as someone who considers himself a conqueror? What facts about Louis Riel's leadership (see page 281) contradict this assessment?
3. Parts of Robert Cunningham's article are more reliable than others, as far as representing the perspectives of Métis people. What parts? What makes them more reliable?
4. Like the Métis uprisings, many events in today's world provoke biased, emotional responses. How can you get a reliable fact-based picture of these kinds of events? With a group of classmates, formulate at least one strategy and share it with the class.

## PERSPECTIVES ON

## Louis Riel



Montréal's *La Presse* newspaper sold more than 50 000 copies of this image of Louis Riel following Riel's execution.

Riel's execution, on November 16, 1885, created deep divisions in Canada. Many Canadiens questioned the verdict, because the jury had not included even one Francophone. Many felt betrayed by the federal government, which had refused to spare Riel's life. Riel's execution struck many Canadiens as evidence that English-speaking Canadians aimed to crush Canadian culture and identity.

Riel, after six months fanning of the flame of dissatisfaction, induced a handful of men to rise in rebellion and commit acts of hostility to constituted authority, which place the perpetrators outside the pale of law. Riel is a fanatic, without judgement or reason. The men whom, in his fanaticism, he instigated to rebellion, are poor ignorant people.

— Adapted from  
*The Gazette*, Montréal,  
25 March 1885, page 4.

Some English-speaking people in Ontario thought of Riel as a traitor, who had stirred up trouble against Canada's authority.

What Canadians do not understand is that Louis Riel is a Father of Confederation... He intuitively sensed the future for Canada and wanted to guarantee a place for Métis people in that future. The fact that he was betrayed and martyred for his efforts only guarantees the fact that today he is hailed by his people as a freedom fighter of the highest order...

— Louis Bruyère, former president of the Native Council of Canada, a contemporary organization representing Métis people and non-Status First Nations people.

For many Métis people, Louis Riel symbolizes their struggle for rights and recognition as a people.

## RESPOND

1. Compare the image of Louis Riel with the descriptions of him on this page. To do this, write a description of Riel, based on the image, or create images of Riel, to match the descriptions. You will now have three images of Louis Riel, or three descriptions.
2. How would you title a newspaper report that put the three images, or the three descriptions, side by side? What graphics could you use to help readers interpret these different versions of Louis Riel?