

**Mount Allison University**

**Gabriel Dumont**

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By

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The North West Rebellion was a turning point for the native people of the new Dominion of Canada. They were finally fighting back for the ill treatment that they were receiving as the government forced them off their lands. Louis Riel is the name that is so often spoken when the uprising is discussed but what of the other people involved? Historians have often mentioned the names of Poundmaker, Big Bear and Gabriel Dumont but they only give them the attention of a minor supporting character in a play. Historians seem to focus on Riel because of his fate after the rebellion ended but few look at the man who sought Riel to lead the Métis into battle against the Dominion government. Why was Gabriel Dumont such an important figure to the Métis?

Gabriel Dumont was born sometime in December of 1837<sup>1</sup> in St. Boniface near the Red River. He was the grandson of a French trader and a Sarcee Indian woman. His father, Isadore, was a farmer in the Red River area in the 1830s. However, when Gabriel was two years old, the family moved to the Fort Pitt region, near the present site of Lloydminster, as the farm began to fail. Here his father traded with the Indians and bought supplies from the Hudson's Bay Company Post. In 1948, Isadore would move the family again back to the Red River region and on this voyage Gabriel would receive his first gun. He bravely alerted the camp of, what he thought was, a Sioux attack. It was in fact a herd of buffalo but they praised him for his error since he didn't run in fear and even asked for a gun to help fight off the would-be invaders. They awarded him with his first rifle which he named Le Petit, the Little One, which he would pass on to every gun he owned.<sup>2</sup>

Gabriel never received a formal education. He would learn how to speak six different native languages, besides French, but never could utter more than a few words of English.<sup>3</sup> He would be schooled in the ways of the land and become an excellent hunter and trapper. At the age of ten he was capable of not only riding but also breaking in ponies. Also, long before he received his first rifle, he was an excellent Bowsman. Once he received his first gun, he became a master marksman as well. It was said that at eighteen years old, Gabriel could “shoot a duck through the head at 100 paces.”<sup>4</sup> He was also a good fisherman and could handle a canoe in the turbulent waters was an easy task.<sup>5</sup>

Gabriel would gain a great deal of respect from the day he received his first gun until the day he died. At 16 years old, he helped fight off a band of Sioux from the United States. As he grew older, his abilities became legendary and he was known from the Red River to the Rockies. Dumont worked for the Hudson’s Bay Company for five years as a trapper, fisherman and guide. He realized that the native way of life was disappearing and decided that he would start a farm. Dumont then became very successful as a farmer and he was renowned for being the most productive. He would branch out and make money from a ferry service across that South Saskatchewan River which was known as Gabriel’s Crossing. He was the envy of the natives in the region not only for his business success but also for being the only person in the area with a billiard table and a foot-powered washing machine.<sup>6</sup>

Dumont would lead several hunting groups and would eventually become the leader of the Buffalo Hunt which was a very prestigious role. The hunt was still important to the Métis and

the natives of the West. There were rules to be followed and Gabriel would now have the authority to enforce these rules if they were broke. In 1873, a Métis government was set up in the village of St. Laurent and Gabriel was elected the President for a one year term. Along with eight other elected officials, they would govern the region on laws based on those used during the buffalo hunt.

Between 1873 and 1884, the Métis from the Saskatchewan region filed several petitions with the government requesting the title to the land that they lived on and they would receive no satisfaction from their attempts. Gabriel went to Montana to ask Louis Riel to return to Canada and be their spokesman. The rest of the story is history, within a year, the Métis would rebel against the Dominion government.

The North-West Rebellion was an important part of Canadian History. It is viewed as the Canadian Government's triumph over the native population of the west. It was looked upon as the pacification of the natives and the Canadian Government's chance to move in and take control of the west. However, the Métis and the natives that banded together during the rebellion defeated the Canadian troops in nearly every conflict. The government depicted a different view of their success to the people of eastern Canada. The strong Canadian government could not fall to a group of Métis and natives. The rebellion raged on but the Métis always seemed to fall back and allow the government's troops to escape. On several occasions, the natives could have destroyed Canada's force but Riel ordered the natives to allow their retreat. Gabriel wanted to be more forceful with the Canadian troops but Riel would not allow it. The Métis and natives could

have won the war if Gabriel was given the opportunity.

Dumont served as Riel's Military General during the conflict and he would lead the natives and Métis to many stunning victories. On several occasions, the militia and the North West Mounted Police drastically outnumbered the natives but they always seemed to drive the Canadians back. The natives and Métis were willing to follow Dumont because of his many accomplishments. Gabriel was skilled at guerilla tactics and his ability to "read the prairie, its weather and its terrain, like a book"<sup>7</sup> this was the main reason for their success throughout the Rebellion.

This would drastically change and the North West Mounted Police would gain one important victory ending the North West Rebellion. Many of the rebels were arrested or surrendered but Dumont refused and hid in the forest. His brother-in-law, Moise Ouellette, asked him to surrender but Gabriel replied with, "You can say to Middleton that I am in the woods and I still have 90 bullets to use on his soldiers."<sup>8</sup>

Gabriel Dumont would flee to the United States and when he reached a Métis community in Montana he learned that Riel had been arrested. He planned a rescue attempt but the high levels of North West Mounted Police in the area made it nearly impossible to try. Dumont wanted to try to rescue Riel but he was unable to do so and Riel was executed creating a martyr to all French speaking citizens of Canada. Dumont would then become an entertainer in Buffalo

Bill Cody's Wild West Show. He would tour with the show for three months where his original duties would be to ride in parades and pose with his rifle. He was billed as "Gabriel Dumont . . . The Hero of the Half Breed Rebellion."<sup>9</sup> Later, he would move to the main arena and show-off his riding and shooting skills. While touring, he was visited by two of his old adversaries, Major Crozier formerly of the NWMP, and Lieutenant Howard who were cordial and joked with him. Lieutenant Howard even claimed "that he had always been careful at Batouche to aim his Gatling gun above Gabriel's head."<sup>10</sup>

In July of 1886, general amnesty was granted to anyone who took part in the rebellion but Gabriel did not return for four years. When he returned, he petitioned for land but it would take eleven years before the petition was granted. Gabriel Dumont would die in his bed, on May 19, 1906, after taking a walk along the trails near Batouche.

Gabriel's life ended living off of the land, much like he did as a young man. With the changing way of life for the native people Gabriel tried to hold on to a piece of the past. Gabriel was a greatly respected man throughout his youth and would become an honored man. Dumont was the driving force behind the North West Rebellion. It was he who sought out Riel to lead the Métis against the government of Canada. Could he lead the Métis to victory without Riel? Yes, Gabriel could have lead them to a quick victory but Riel kept holding him back. His knowledge of the land and the elements were far superior to anyone on the Canadian side of the rebellion and that alone gave the natives the upper hand. Dumont's accomplishments made him a greatly trusted and respected man making it easier for the Métis and the native troops to follow him into

battle.

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9. McKee, Sandra L.; Gabriel Dumont Indian Fighter (Frontier Publishing Ltd., Calgary, 1977) pp. 45.
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