Louis Riel and the Rebellions
The 1869–70 uprising in the Red River Colony was sparked by the transfer of the vast territory of Rupert's Land to the new nation of Canada. The colony of farmers and hunters, many of them Métis, occupied a corner of Rupert's Land and feared for their culture and land rights under Canadian control.

The Red River Colony was founded in 1812 by Scottish settlers at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers (what is now downtown Winnipeg). After 1836 the colony was administered by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and populated mainly by francophone and anglophone Métis people. Most were the descendants of French and English voyageurs and coureurs de bois who had come west in the fur trade and settled down with Aboriginal wives.
The Red River inhabitants were continually in conflict with the HBC, particularly over trading privileges.

During the lengthy negotiations to transfer sovereignty to Canada, Protestant settlers from the East moved into the colony, and their obtrusive, aggressive ways led the Roman Catholic Métis to fear for the preservation of their religion, land rights and culture.

Neither the British nor the Canadian government — with no appreciation of the Métis people — made any serious efforts to ease these fears, negotiating the transfer of Rupert's Land as if no population existed there.
In early November 1869, Louis Riel emerged as Métis spokesman, and the leader of a group of Red River militants who prevented McDougall, and the incoming Canadian land-survey party, from entering the colony.

Métis opposition caused the Canadian government to refuse to assume control of the territory on 1 December 1869, as had been agreed.

This encouraged the rebels who had seized Upper Fort Garry — the main HBC trading post at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine — and who planned to hold it until the Canadian government agreed to negotiate.

Representatives of the rebel colonists were summoned to an elected convention, which in December proclaimed a provisional government, soon headed by Riel.

In January Riel gained the support of most of the anglophone community in a second convention, which agreed to form a representative provisional government to discuss terms of entry into Confederation.
Armed conflict persisted over the winter, but Riel seemed in control until he made the **colossal blunder** of permitting the court-martialling and execution of a prisoner, **Thomas Scott**, one of a group of English-speaking Ontario settlers who opposed the rebel government.

Amid the turmoil, Scott and some fellow Ontarians had been captured and imprisoned at Upper Fort Garry.

Scott's subsequent **death by firing squad**, despite outside pleas to Riel not to carry out the execution, inflamed passions among Protestants in Ontario.

Although the Canadian authorities were still willing to negotiate with Riel, they refused to grant an unconditional **amnesty** to him and the other rebel leaders.
On 12 May, a new, postage-sized province called Manitoba was created by the **Manitoba Act**, its territory severely limited in contrast to the vast North West, which would soon be acquired by the Canadian government.

Even within Manitoba, public lands were controlled by the federal government. Métis land titles were guaranteed and 607,000 hectares were reserved for the children of Métis families, but these arrangements were mismanaged by subsequent federal governments.
After the murder of Thomas Scott, Ottawa declared Louis Riel a criminal; he and his lieutenants, fled into exile in August 1870.

After the uprising, the Métis soon found themselves so disadvantaged in Manitoba that they moved farther west, where they would again attempt — more violently and tragically this time — to fight for their rights with Riel in the North-West Rebellion of 1885.

The Metis and natives, who were constantly facing discrimination, loss of land, loss of culture and who were ignored by the Canadian government, began another uprising in what is now the Canadian Prairies in 1885. They encouraged Louis Riel to lead them in their fight, and he did, but it was to no avail. The rebellion was quashed and Louis Riel surrendered.
The trial of Louis Riel was one of the biggest spectacles in Canadian history.

He was charged with **high treason** for leading the North West Rebellion. Riel told the jury that he surrendered on purpose because he wanted to be judged based on the way he acted during the Rebellions.

He argued that he worked peacefully and that he and the rebels were only trying to defend themselves and their rights.

The Canadian government did their best to silence Riel as they blamed him entirely for the two uprisings.

Riel's trial was moved from Winnipeg to Regina when the government discovered that a Manitoba jury could be half Métis. Of the six men on the Regina jury - *only one spoke French.*

**Prime Minister John A. MacDonald decided to charge Riel with high treason, based on an obscure British law dating to the year 1342. This law carried the death the penalty whereas Canada's treason law did not.**
The trial lasted four days. Riel spoke to the court, and outlined the unfair treatment of Métis living in the west. He also spoke about his vision of creating a society that was ethnically diverse and accepting of all races.

Riel's lawyers tried to get him acquitted by explaining that Riel was insane. *(Riel considered himself a prophet from God sent to help his people. He also advocated moving the seat of the Catholic Church from the Vatican to Canada.)*

It took the jury less than four hours to reach a guilty verdict, but requested that Riel should not be put to death.

On August 3, 1885, the judge ignored the jury's requests and sentenced Riel to be hanged. Despite several appeals and continuing questions about his sanity, Riel was hanged on November 16, 1885 in Regina.