

The Civilian Who Humbled an Army

GABRIEL DUMONT

- ◆ b. St. Boniface, Northwest Territory, December 1837
- ◆ d. Batoche, Saskatchewan, May 19, 1906

Gabriel Dumont during his lifetime played many roles. He was born in the area of the Northwest Territories that is now southern Manitoba. He was a buffalo hunter until those animals disappeared, a plainsman, a farmer and a leader of Metis insurgents during the Northwest Rebellion of 1885 which is better known as The Riel Rebellion. Prior to and during the rebellion he was Louis Riel's principal lieutenant. Had Riel listened to him instead of his mysterious voices, he may well have emerged the victor.

Dumont was second-generation Metis. (The name given those born of French-Canadian and Native parents.) His father, Isadore Dumont, was from Quebec; his mother, Louise Laframboise, was of French and Cree blood.

Gabriel Dumont never intended to become famous. A quiet, modest, unassuming man he moved to what is now Saskatchewan where he took up farming when his buffalo hunting ended. For several years he cultivated a small acreage along the banks of the South Saskatchewan River. He augmented his farm income by running a toll ferry across the wide river. In winter he ran a trapline.

For twenty years he played the role of a farmer minding his own business and never once sought any other role in spite of ongoing entreaties from his neighbors to represent them in the continuous disputes between Ottawa and the Metis. At first he would have none of it but later saw the injustice of the federal government's policies as they applied to both Metis and native Indians.

He eventually fell in with Louis Riel because, as did so many others, he saw Riel as the savior of the Metis. Soon, however, he became disillusioned with Riel who was beginning to show definite signs of an unbalanced mind. Because the effort of addressing the complaints of the Metis was progressing so well he stayed with him even after Riel's insanity had become apparent. Dumont took charge of a large contingent of Metis, saw to their training and use of arms and drilled them into a good enough body of soldiers that when the fighting started they acquitted themselves well. In fact, Dumont's fighters won most of their battles, made the army look foolish and, had they been a larger force, would likely have won overall. It was to Dumont's credit that he managed to mold the ragtag band into an effective fighting force.

Riel's rebellion was probably doomed from the very beginning. He had begun to make irrational statements owing to his belief that he was the reincarnation of Christ. This revelation caused a great rift among his followers, soured many of his Quebec allies and caused the Catholic Church to denounce him. Despite all that, he managed to keep a great amount of support. He eventually led the Metis and their Indian allies into tragedy when his rebellion failed against the combined force of the Canadian militia and the Northwest Mounted Police.

During the rebellion the forces under Dumont did everything but win the final skirmish. Riel, had he listened to Dumont, might have pulled off the biggest coup in the history of the Canadian west. Instead he remained indecisive, unable to give orders yet unwilling to turn command over to the one man who might have saved his followers. Dumont, in the field far removed from his commander-in-chief, could only fret silently while trying to keep his own forces motivated. Before long Riel's command collapsed and it was every man for himself. His forces scattered—all except those under the command of Dumont who fought one last, final, losing battle.

Following the failure of the rebellion Riel was captured. He went to trial in Regina. Against the advice of his lawyers who wanted to enter a plea of "not guilty by reason of insanity," Riel steadfastly refused to allow the plea. Had he done so he would likely have been acquitted. Instead he was found guilty and was hanged, November 16, 1885, at Regina.

Dumont was never arrested or prosecuted for his part in the affair. This was not an oversight on the part of Ottawa. The federal

government would have scooped him up in a minute had he been available, but apprehension might have been difficult for already he was being seen for what he was—a brilliant field general, a strategist and a patriot whose only error was being on the losing side. Canadian soldiers and NWMP officers, whose duty it would have been to arrest him, respected this man, however grudging their respect may have been. Even the bumbling commander of the militia, the less-than-competent General Middleton, came to view him as a worthy opponent. In fact, Middleton was hardly a worthy opponent to Dumont who would have routed him easily had he had the resources.

Dumont, feeling he was going to be arrested, escaped to the United States. He spent some time in New York where he became a sort of celebrity much in demand as a speaker. He became famous and it may have been his international popularity that made Ottawa reluctant to push for his arrest. Dumont eventually felt safe enough to return home.

He spent the next few years trying to salvage some of the ideals for which the Metis had fought but found that even the Metis had lost interest in the original cause. In 1893 Dumont gave up the struggle and returned to his farm on the banks of the South Saskatchewan where he settled down to farm and trap once again. When he died midway through his sixty-ninth year, he had become more or less forgotten. But he did live long enough to see many of the reforms for which he had fought slowly put into law. Manitoba became a province with Saskatchewan following soon after. While the Metis never gained an independent nation, they did gain some important concessions, such as representation in political decisions and a voice in Manitoba politics. Gabriel Dumont had seen to that.

It was during the 1970s that a resurgence of interest in Riel reminded people of Gabriel Dumont. Had Riel not ignored Dumont's reasoned pleas and accepted his vision of what the Metis really wanted the rebellion would not likely have happened. Some authors and poets have hastened to glorify the mad Riel when they should have been concentrating their efforts on the sane Dumont.

However, a hanged Riel, complete with rope burns on his neck, made a better hero for tawdry apologia than did Dumont who died in his bed of old age, respected by all. Gabriel Dumont was the intelligence behind the Metis cause; Louis Riel was the catalyst that kindled its defeat.