INTRODUCTION

A LAMENT TO MANITOBA

ROBERT WARDHAUGH

Robert Wardhaugh is Professor of History at Western University. He is an expert in Canadian regional (the Prairie West) and political (late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century) history. Professor Wardhaugh is author of *Mackenzie King and the Prairie West (2000), Behind the Scenes: The Life and Work of William Clifford Clark* (2010), and *The Rowell-Sirois Commission and the Remaking of Canadian Federalism* (2021) with Barry Ferguson. He is editor of three collections on the Prairie West, including *Manitoba Premiers of the 19th and 20th Centuries* (along with Barry Ferguson). Professor Wardhaugh is also co-author of the widely-used university textbooks on Canadian history, *Origins and Destinies* (with Alan MacEachern).

Over the past few decades, Canadians have heard much about historical anniversaries. We have been told that as a country it is important to commemorate and celebrate our past achievements. Without these historic milestones, our sense of nationhood will weaken and fragment. From the War of 1812 to the First World War of 1914-18, there have been no shortage of nationalistic, self-congratulatory commemorations. However, being aware of our histories is not the same as celebrating them. This point became only too apparent during the attempts to celebrate Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation and its birth as a nation in 1867. For those old enough to remember the Centennial of 1967, and the surge of English-Canadian nationalism at the time, the celebrations of 2017 seemed a pale comparison. Perhaps Canadians are indeed beginning to grapple with the lessons our histories have to teach us.

In 2020 Manitoba turned 150 years old. To be more precise, the political creation of the province of Manitoba occurred a century and a half ago. While debate continues over whether Confederation should be celebrated or whether statues of Canada's first prime minister, John A. Macdonald, should be removed, there should be less debate over whether Manitoba's entry into Confederation as the fifth province in 1870 is a cause of celebration. To be blunt, it isn't. The articles presented here by a selection of Manitoba's academic story-tellers make that fact abundantly clear.

In 1957, Manitoba's most eminent historian, W.L. Morton, wrote a provincial history that still holds up to this day. Morton was raised in the small town of Gladstone, Manitoba and his interpretation of the province's history was predicated on Red River as a dual society that struck a balance between

French-Catholic Métis and British-Protestant settlers. The Manitoba Act of 1870 that created the province was portrayed as the successful embodiment of this dual character. For Morton, the struggle for Manitoba was a microcosm of the struggle for Canada. While the flood of Ontario settlers following the 1870 accord threatened this duality, the western immigration boom of 1896 to 1911 brought a diversity of peoples. In Morton's mind, Manitoba was a British-Canadian province but immigration patterns ensured a culturally-pluralistic society. There was much to celebrate. In the second edition of *Manitoba: A History*, published in 1967 to commemorate Canada's centennial, Morton lamented the decline of rural life and the weakening of the British connection, but maintained a dualistic interpretation.

How times change and historical interpretations along with them. Many Canadians today want something to celebrate when they think about their histories. While they generally understand that we should not "white wash" our past and omit more negative and darker chapters, they also reject the idea that history is more bad than good. Unfortunately, it is often the case, whether it fits into our desired construction of the past or not. And while political polarization only exacerbates and obscures the issues, the truth is that while some may celebrate Manitoba as the province it eventually became, there was little if anything to celebrate after 1870.

A quick glance at the various actors involved in Manitoba's entry into Confederation makes this point obvious. Were there any winners in 1870? The Indigenous nations surrounding Red River, such as the Anishinabe and Swampy Cree, were completely ignored in the negotiations that led to the British purchase and transfer of Rupert's Land from Hudson's Bay Company control to Canada, what Gerry Friesen dubbed "the largest real estate deal in Canadian history." The arrival of settler colonialism (the process and structure of dispossessing indigenous peoples of their land base and replacing them with invasive settlers who assert their own narratives of belonging) led rapidly to the signing of the Numbered Treaties to extinguish aboriginal title to the lands of the Prairie West. The treaty process led to broken promises and relocation, famine and disease, segregation onto reserves, and the residential school system.

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The Métis were successful in the Red River Resistance. At least this is how it appeared for a brief instant in 1870. Led by Louis Riel, the dominant group in Red River successfully negotiated the Manitoba Act that brought the Settlement into Canada as a province. The Act promised protections for the French language and schools, and a land grant for the Métis. Like the Treaties, however, these promises were broken almost as quickly as they were made. Manitoba's "Father of Confederation," Louis Riel, was chased from the province and into exile by the raping and murdering Wolseley Expedition recently arrived from Canada to "restore" law and order. As Ontarians moved in, many Métis abandoned their Red River homeland and moved further into the Northwest, where they

would find themselves in an even more devastating and consequential conflict with Canada fifteen years later. The Métis convinced Riel to return and lead his people once again. And Riel attempted to follow a path similar to that followed in Manitoba in 1870. But conditions were not the same in 1885. The immediate threat of American annexationism had passed, the North-West Mounted Police were in place across the region, and the near-complete Canadian Pacific Railway allowed the Macdonald government in Ottawa to get troops out west relatively quickly. The Métis were eventually crushed and Riel was hanged as a rebel. The Métis, along with other Indigenous nations, were pushed to the margins of history where they were expected to die out or assimilate.

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The interests of Quebec were represented in Red River by the Roman Catholic Church, a close ally of the Métis and a long-standing source of missionaries in the region. Over fifty percent of the population of Red River was French and Catholic in 1870. Bishop Alexandre-Antonin Taché of St. Boniface was absent from Red River during the Resistance while he attended the First Vatican Council in Rome but Father Noël-Joseph Ritchot played an instrumental role as one of the three representatives of the Settlement who negotiated the Manitoba Act in Ottawa. While they failed to gain their desired buffer-reserve for French Catholics in Manitoba, they were successful in creating a bilingual and bicultural province. But the victory was to be short-lived. The influx of Ontario settlers in the two decades that followed left the French Catholics as only ten percent of the population. The Manitoba Schools Question of the 1890s put another nail in the coffin of the Manitoba Act and made it clear that French Catholics in the province came out on the losing end.

Even Canada and its prime minister had little to celebrate in 1870. It was not in John A. Macdonald's "dream of nation" to create the young dominion's fifth province only three years after Confederation had been achieved. The creation of provinces was supposed to happen further down the road. Indeed, the plan from Ottawa was to receive the transfer of Rupert's Land, sign treaties with Indigenous nations, survey the Northwest for white settlement, build a transcontinental railroad, and then bring in immigrant farmers to create the nation's breadbasket as well as consumers for central Canada's manufactured goods. The Northwest was to be Canada's colony – a colony of a colony. Macdonald's plan, however, was temporarily scuttled when the Red River Settlement resisted. Anxious over fears of American annexationism and with no rail connections to dispatch a military force from Ontario quickly, the federal government had little choice but to negotiate and accept the creation of the "postage stamp" province decades earlier than Canada desired.

While settler colonialism was the real winner in Manitoba's creation, even its immediate adherents were only partial victors. By 1870 Red River had been infiltrated by a group known as the "expansionists," generally referring to ambitious British-

Protestant Ontarian speculators who had arrived in the Settlement as the vanguard of what was to come. The purchase of Rupert's Land provided the opportunity for Ontario to expand westward, thereby overwhelming its rival Quebec for national influence. But the Manitoba Act instead created a "little Quebec" with provisions for bilingualism and denominational (Catholic) schools. The expansionists resisted the resisters by opposing Riel's provisional government, but the result was the execution of one of their own – Thomas Scott. The fateful move would lead ultimately to Riel's exile after 1870 and his own execution in 1885. It stirred up serious divisions between Quebec and Ontario for years to come. It would take Macdonald's Conservative Party a century to recover from the damage done in Quebec. The Métis became a pawn in the larger struggle between Quebec and Ontario but the truth is, neither really cared about the Métis or Manitoba.

The story of Manitoba's creation is unique amongst the provinces of Canada. As history, the story of the Red River Resistance makes for more riveting reading than the tales of political negotiation and compromise, that resulted in Confederation and the addition of other provinces. But as the contributions to this special issue on Manitoba's Founders and Builders make clear, the consequences of the Red River Resistance and Manitoba's creation as a province are lamentable. And these consequences are still very much with us today.

Peter Pond, *Hudson's Bay's Country*, 1785. Image Courtesy of Library of Congress. ►