

Surveyors of The Past

—BY CHARLES FAIRHALL—

SURVEYORS AND THE NORTHWEST REBELLION

One of the most fascinating characters to emerge from the pages of Canada's colourful past is Louis Riel. A recent C.B.C. television programme has offered us a much more sympathetic portrait of this ill-starred man than that afforded by our history books. It is interesting to note the role surveyors played in the unfolding drama.

In the summer of 1869, Lieut.-Col. J. Stoughton Dennis (later to become Canada's first Surveyor-General), Milner Hart and Major A. C. Webb, three Provincial Land Surveyors from Ontario, were actively engaged in the establishment of township outlines in the Red River Territory, in anticipation of the transfer of Prince Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company to the Dominion of Canada. Despite Dennis' best efforts to reach a basis of understanding with the Métis leaders, a confrontation soon occurred.

On October 11, in the area slightly east of the recently established Winnipeg Meridian, a group of Métis headed by Louis Riel approached Major Webb and his survey party. With his foot firmly planted on the surveyor's chain, Riel proclaimed his opposition to the Federal Government's presence in the Territory.

On March 4, 1870, Riel ordered the execution of Thomas Scott, a member of John Snow's survey party carrying out road surveys in the Red River Settlement. This precipitous act led to the dispatch of Federal troops to the area, causing Riel to flee in great haste to seek sanctuary in the United States.

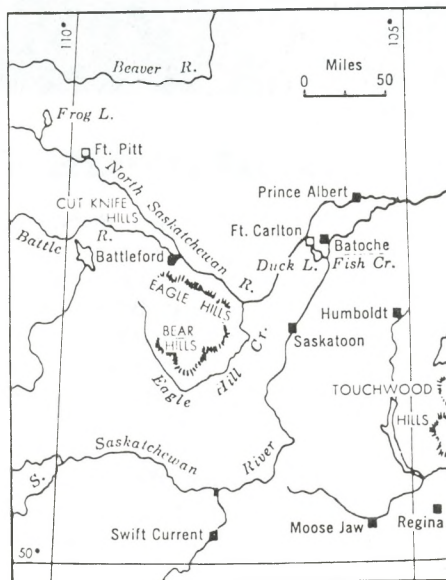
He returned in 1885, ready to help redress the grievances of his people, and at Batoche on March 18, the North West Rebellion was born. Once again surveyors were directly involved, but not in the manner one would suppose.

The following excerpt from 'Men & Meridians'. Vol. 2, is reprinted here with the kind permission of author Don Thomson, to whom I am indebted for past and present favours.

In the spring of 1885 the annual meeting of the association of Dominion Land Surveyors, organized in Winnipeg

in April, 1882, took place in Ottawa. Word of the hostilities at Duck Lake reached the capital while the association was in session and the news caused a considerable stir among those in attendance. Many of these men had surveyed in the North West and realized at once that the outbreak of violence would result in a serious suspension of western survey work for the 1885 season.

On April 1 an informal meeting of the surveyors took place in Russell House, a centrally-located Ottawa hotel, for the purpose of organizing a surveyors' militia unit to take an active part in any military expedition formed to quell the disturbances. After discussion it was decided to ask ten Dominion Land Surveyors to each provide four assistants (men who had seen survey service in the North West and who were familiar with conditions there) to form a corps of fifty men. The following day a deputation waited on Sir David L. Macpherson, Minister of the Interior, who strongly recommend-



Scene of military action
1885 Rebellion

ed the proposal to his colleague. Sir Adolphe Caron, Minister of Militia. A committee waited on the latter, urging official acceptance of the offer of such a corps, armed and mounted, and to act as intelligence men, scouts or as mounted rifles. The scheme was approved after the Minister had consulted by telegraph with the Commanding Officer of the North West expedition, Major-General Frederick Middleton. The surveyors were then advised to appoint a captain to command the proposed unit. Arthur Oliver Wheeler, who had qualified as a Provincial Land Surveyor in Manitoba in 1881 and as a Dominion Land Surveyor in the following year, was first offered the post. Although Wheeler had surveyed Canadian Pacific Railway townsites in the West in 1882 and township outlines in the following season, he felt he was not experienced enough in conditions in the Midwest and declined the nomination. The command was next offered to Lewis R. Ord, who had been appointed a Dominion Land Surveyor three years previously. He, too, demurred and John Stoughton Dennis Jr. was then elected.

The Dominion Land Surveyors Intelligence Corps was quickly formed and proceeded by Pullman car to Winnipeg by way of Chicago and St. Paul, arriving in the Manitoba capital on April 11. At Winnipeg more surveyors were recruited for the unit and weapons were obtained as well as saddles and other equipment. The Corps then proceeded to Qu'Appelle where horses were supplied from the winter depot for survey horses. The sequel of this move is related in **Reminiscences of a Bungle**, the memoirs of a corpsman published anonymously but believed to be the impressions of Lieut. Lewis R. Ord:

"Our captain [then] prepared to put us through our drill . . . "Pre-pareto-mount! Mount! Some of the troopers get up so rapidly that they fall over on the other side; some crawl up like a boy up a greased pole at a fair; here a horse stands as if he had taken root; another pivots round and round on his own axis, and many signify their distaste for riders by bursting from line like lightning from a cloud, bucking strenuously . . . we are about as disorderly a lot as one could care to see . . . some were really good riders but a great many would have felt much safer on the ground where, indeed, several were violently deposited during the first encounter with their charges."

Orders were finally received to travel on April 20 to Swift Current and from there to serve as a despatch-carrying unit, linking Swift Current to forces in the field. After the engagement at Fish Creek the Intelligence Corps joined the main column of the Expedition. In his special report covering the events of May

10, 1885, Major-General Middleton states: "The Land Surveyor's Scouts, 50 strong, under Captain Dennis, joined my force in the afternoon . . .". The general, in his diary entries, seemed disposed to avoid use of the more impressive title "Intelligence Corps". Captain Dennis himself frankly admits that the latter name for the unit, though more official, was less correct than the term used by the general as the 'intelligence' it had dared to offer the high command on several occasions "was not looked upon with special favour". Another member of the Corps observed in this connection that "we were looked upon as very small potatoes by the gold-laced gentry of the regular militia". Derisively they were labelled as the "49 officers and one scout" because of the high proportion of commission-holders, 22 out of a total enlistment of 53. Twenty-two men of the Corps were Dominion Land Surveyors, including William Crawford of Milverton, Ontario, the first man to receive a Dominion Land Surveyor's certificate from a Board of Examiners (June 17, 1875). Two other Dominion Land Surveyors, Liet. E. W. Hubbell and Capt. J. L. Reid, enlisted in the Midland Battalion for the campaign in the North West.

Another important Canadian unit in the Expedition was Boulton's Scouts, a mounted outfit raised and commanded by Major Charles Arkoll Boulton (1841-99), who had been a member of J. S. Dennis's survey crew of 1869 on the banks of the Red. Leader of the Portage Party in those earlier troubles Boulton had been captured by Riel's men and had been condemned to death. His sentence was reprieved by Riel following urgent representations on his behalf. Boulton became a senator in the last year of his life, 1899.

At Fish Creek (Tourond's Crossing), on April 23, Gabriel Dumont and his métis stalled Middleton's advance northward along the South Saskatchewan River. It was at Batoche that the Surveyors' Corps joined the main Middleton force. According to Ord, "Blankets under saddles, Johnson's fluid beef, feed of oats and a tin-billy tied on behind; small package of tea, some hard tack biscuits and corned beef in canteen [two of us] rode out on April 24 with orders for the other half of our unit. Soon [it was] rain and snow . . ."

At the approaches to Batoche, when the métis had a dug in for a last stand, the Surveyors' Corps finally came under fire. Renowned for their sharpshooting ability, the métis occupied a defensive ring around the town. The ring consisted of scattered, individual rifle pits. Riel held some ten prisoners in the basement of a Batoche store. On May

9 firing had begun. Fighting continued in this operation over a period of four days. Middleton, to the dismay of his Canadian militiamen, followed a most cautious policy. Soon after the first shots were fired in this engagement he sent his chief of staff, Lord Melgund, later Earl of Minto and Governor-General of Canada, in great haste to Ottawa to plead for the despatch of more men. He little knew the fighting calibre of men already under his command and, least of all, of the redoubtable Surveyors' Corps. Ord takes up the story of events:

"Wheeler suggested that we should go out and occupy one of the rifle pits that had been dug along the top of the river bank . . . and for want of better employment we did so." It was after this sally that Lieut. Wheeler was shot through the muscles of his arm near the shoulder.

May 12, a crucial day in the development of the battle, dawned bright and warm, ". . . were it not for the sight of the hospital tent and its wounded, and the crack of the skirmishers' rifles near the church, we could almost think it a survey." Middleton had continued in his careful ways and after ordering a partial advance, went to lunch. His repast was interrupted by an outburst of renewed firing and wild cheering. The Canadians, chafing for days under the tight rein of what they considered to be an excessively prudent command, had utilized the mild order to openly charge the rebel rifle pits.

"Handicapped by our heavy boots and spurs and encumbered by our useless revolvers, cheering, laughing, swearing, keeping up an irregular fire into the bush, and yet advancing at a rapid run we charged [if the rush of a lot of undisciplined ragamuffins can be called a charge]. Officers are needless, for we are unanimous in our attentions. There is no red tape to hold us back, the boys have their heads now. The crack, crack of the repeaters come thick and fast. The whistle of bullets tell us the enemy are not idle. Now and again the dull boom of a field gun sounds over the field, followed by the echo of a bursting shell."

In this stirring action, which resulted in the capture of Batoche, the surveyors did not emerge unscathed. Lieut. Thomas Fawcett and Lieut. J. F. Garden were wounded; Garden in the left arm and Fawcett "had buckshot in the chest muscles". The wounding of Fawcett does not appear to have been officially recorded. But the most grievous casualty suffered by the unit was the loss of Lieut. Alexander Walter Kippen. In Middleton's report (page 31) the General states, "I regret to say that one of the surveyors' Scouts was killed,

having been shot through the head while lying with the rest of his troop in a bluff on our left". (Only 8 men in all were killed in the Expedition in its attack on Batoche.)

In the last words of the surveyor-reporter, "We are a hard and careless lot as a rule, we surveyors, rough associates, hard work, and lack of women's society causes men to grow indifferent to the feelings of others, but I noticed that the troop was quiet and less joking carried on. The first gap had been made in our ranks and we could faintly imagine how Kippen would be missed in the little home circle in Eastern Canada [Perth, Ontario] . . . His quaint sayings and cheerful laugh are gone from No. 1 tent. We cannot realize the sorrow of his parents when the first warning of their loss reaches them in a brief telegram, 'A. W. Kippen, Surveyors' Corps, killed'."

On May 15 and for some days following, the Surveyors' Corps and Major Boulton's Mounted Infantry were ordered to round up hostile Indians (Big Bear and his followers) and any rebel fugitives. Riel was brought into camp by scouts and was received courteously by Middleton. The Surveyors' Corps moved into Prince Albert after the capitulation of Batoche and was then detailed to escort the transport train to Battleford. As part of the chase after Big Bear the Corps then moved on to Fort Pitt and into the wilderness near Beaver River and Cold Lake. It was during this stage of the campaign that the experience of surveyors and of surveyors' assistants proved most useful. Moving through rough country they opened roads, corduroyed swamps and muskegs and surmounted various kinds of natural obstacles. Returning to Battleford the Corps was detailed to establish a picket line along the south bank of the South Saskatchewan River to intercept hostile Indians heading south. During this period a number of Indians were arrested, among them some who had participated in the Frog Lake massacre and who were hanged for their crimes at Battleford.

A memorable incident during the May 12 fighting is reported in Middleton's despatch of that day, "In the middle of our firing I saw a man riding towards me, waving a white flag. I rode forward to meet him and found it was Mr. Ashley [sic], a surveyor, one of the men who had been made captive by Riel. He told me he had just come from Riel, who was apparently in a great stage of agitation, and handed me a letter from him in which he said that if I massacred his women and children (by shellfire) they would massacre **their** prisoners . . .".

John William Astley faced the dismal task of returning to the distressed

Riel with a reply from Middleton. In the outcome the prisoners were not harmed but Astley at the time could hardly have felt complete assurance of the safety of himself and his fellow captives.

Astley is described by Middleton and by others as a surveyor but his name does not appear in any professional list of the time, provincial or federal. He was a witness for prosecution at the Riel trial in Regina and was sworn as such on July 28, 1885. G. W. Burbidge, Q. C., asked of him the nature of his occupation. "Civil engineer, land surveyor and explorer", replied Astley, "I reside at Prince Albert, having been there about three years. During that time (I) engaged in land surveying and exploration . . . ". It is unlikely that Astley ever was in charge of a field party on a survey work but he could have been one of a party serving under a qualified surveyor in any one of several capacities. He could not have signed a surveyor's plan that would carry any official validity.

On June 30 the Dominion Lands Surveyors' Intelligence Corps rode to

Moose Jaw, there to disband. In his report of May 12 Middleton paid a high compliment to the Corps commander, "Captain Dennis, commanding the Surveyors' Scouts, did excellent service and deserves great praise for the way in which he handled his men."

The Corps contained a number of men who later distinguished themselves in surveying and in public life. John S. Dennis Jr., later became assistant to the president of the Canadian Pacific Railway and chief commissioner of its immigration and colonization development activities. He was made a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George. G. H. Brabazon became a member of parliament for Pontiac; Thomas Fawcett on three separate occasions was made a president of the Association of Dominion Land Surveyors; B. J. Saunders was named, in the course of time, honorary Lieut.-Colonel of the 101st Regiment, Edmonton Fusiliers, and A. O. Wheeler made a national reputation as a mapper and surveyor in the Rocky Mountains and other rugged regions of the Far West.

J. J. Burrows, appointed a Dominion Land Surveyor in 1878, served as quartermaster of the Corps and so distinguished himself in that post that on one occasion his commanding officer was paraded before Major-General Middleton to answer a complaint from the commissariat. The commissariat officers stated that Quartermaster Burrows and his detail would swipe the very fillings out of their teeth unless they slept with their mouths tightly shut!

The activities of the Corps in 1885, in the estimation of their commander, proved the special adaptability of men of the surveying profession. They were able to participate effectively in military operations and to care for themselves resourcefully in a new and somewhat unknown country. Most of the men forming the Corps had experience in prairie transport and camping as well as in the use of firearms. As Capt. Dennis put it, the work performed [by the Corps] may, I think, be reasonably included in the statement of the important work done by the surveyors of Canada in the development of our great Western territory."