

# WOMEN OF THE FUR TRADE

FRANCES KONCAN

SECOND EDITION



BELCOURT '57

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To Louis Riel, the Mr. Brightside of the  
Province of Manitoba.



# STUDY GUIDE

BY ASHLEY WILLIAMSON

*This tool will help teachers and students analyze *Women of the Fur Trade* by Frances Koncan. It includes historical context and discussion prompts to use before, during, and after reading the play. For those who may not have read a play before, suggestions for how to approach reading a play are also included.*

## HOW TO READ A PLAY

**Before You Read:** What do you already know about this play? How does it fit in with other things you are reading or have read for class?

**While You Read:** Identify and define any unfamiliar terms. Use a dictionary. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* is a good resource.

Put down your highlighter! Make marginal notes or comments using a pencil instead. Every time you feel the urge to highlight something, write instead. Ask questions, offer interpretations, track characters or themes.

Make a diagram or family tree of characters and their relationships to one another.

Keep track of what happens on stage versus what happens off stage—what we are shown versus what we are told.

Read the play out loud, preferably with other people. Plays come to life when seen and heard.

Find photographs or a video of this play online so you can visualize the action you're reading about. Make note of what is different between the script and the production, or notes about the acting, costumes, or set choices.

**After You Read:** Summarize what you have read and learned. Pretend you are explaining it to a friend from class, if that helps. Or record yourself talking about it. Organizing your thoughts about what you have read can clarify things that weren't immediately obvious to you.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT: TERMS, PEOPLE, AND PLACES

This section fills out the historical landscape of the play by offering a primer on the period before and immediately after Confederation. It is by no means a comprehensive account of events, people, and places but rather a foundation for further study.

### *Timeline of Events Relevant to the Métis Resistance 1869–1885*

Pre-colonization | The Forks, the site where the Red and Assiniboine Rivers join, is maintained as an important meeting place for Indigenous peoples for at least 6,000 years. The Forks and the area of what is now known as southern Manitoba is the home and traditional lands of the Anishinaabe, Ininew, and Dakota peoples.

1811 | The Red River Colony is established by Thomas Douglas, the Earl of Selkirk, on a 300,000 square kilometre land grant that covers most of southern Manitoba.

1821 | A merger of the North West Company and the Hudson's Bay Company boosts immigration of Scottish and French Métis families to the Red River Colony.

1846 | Led by Alexander “Koonaubay” Isbister, the Métis people petition the British government to be acknowledged as a distinct culture, with the Red River Colony granted status as a recognized British colony.

1867 | Canadian Confederation: three British colonies—the Province of Canada (which will split to become Ontario and Quebec), Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick—unite to form the Dominion of Canada.

1869 | The Hudson’s Bay Company sells its rights to Rupert’s Land—which included the whole of Manitoba (including the Red River Colony), most of Saskatchewan, southern Alberta, southern Nunavut, and the northern portions of Ontario and Quebec—to the Dominion of Canada.

October–November 1869 | Threatened by a survey party sent to the Red River Colony by the Canadian government and the negotiation of the land transfer without their involvement, the Métis—under separate groups led by Louis Riel and William Dease—form the Métis National Committee to represent Métis interests and to call for the formation of a Métis nation. The committee occupies Upper Fort Garry in what is now Winnipeg and turn back the survey party.

8 December 1869 | The Métis form a provisional government with Louis Riel as leader and begin negotiations with the Dominion government for Rupert’s Land to formally enter Canadian Confederation.

March 1870 | Irish Protestant settler Thomas Scott is executed at Fort Garry. Riel’s level of involvement in the execution is unclear, but Scott’s death strains relations between the Métis and the Canadian federal government.

April 1870 | The Métis and the Canadian government negotiate in Ottawa for the Red River Colony to join confederation, with provisions from the Métis to include bilingual denominational schools, judicial and parliamentary systems, and measures to maintain their title to the land. Attempts to secure amnesty for Riel fail.

12 May 1870 | The Manitoba Act is passed and the territory officially becomes a province. Métis land rights are recognized as part of the deal.

May–August 1870 | The Red River Expeditionary Force of 700 militiamen is created by the Canadian federal government and sent to Manitoba to ensure the peaceful transfer of power. Riel and his supporters are fearful that the expedition will act punitively towards those who formed the provisional government.

24 August 1870 | Riel and some supporters flee to the us.

1870–1885 | Led by the Canadian government under John A. Macdonald, and contrary to promises made under the Manitoba Act, land grabs and military settlement around Winnipeg, initiated by the Red River Expeditionary Force, drive the Manitoba Métis westward.

1872 | Saskatchewan Métis petition to form a colony of 1,800,000 acres.

Summer 1884 | The Métis of Saskatchewan convince Louis Riel to return to Canada to petition the federal government on their behalf.

18 March 1885 | The Provisional Government of Saskatchewan is established with Louis Riel as president and Gabriel Dumont as adjutant general, declaring independence from the Dominion of Canada.

26 March 1885 | The Battle of Duck Lake marks the beginning of the North-West Resistance.

9 May 1885 | At the Battle of Batoche, Métis groups effectively resist Canadian forces for three days but are ultimately defeated.

20 July–1 August 1885 | Louis Riel is tried and found guilty of high treason by Crown prosecutors.

16 November 1885 | Louis Riel is executed for treason in Regina.



### *A Short Summary of the Red River Resistance*

The Red River Resistance of 1869–1870 was an uprising of local residents against the transfer of Rupert’s Land from the Hudson’s Bay Company to the new Dominion of Canada. The participants in the resistance were mostly Métis hunters and farmers, the descendants of French-speaking *voyageur* and *coureurs des bois*, early Scottish settlers, and nehiyaw and Ojibwe buffalo hunters.

The Red River Colony was founded in 1811 by Lord Selkirk at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, in what is now called Winnipeg. The two main fur trading posts of the region were the North West Company’s Fort Gibraltar and a small Hudson’s Bay Company outpost in what is now St. Boniface. In 1836, the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) added this settlement to its already massive holdings in Rupert’s Land, but as Canada moved towards Confederation and the American government moved to settle the west, the HBC decided that selling off their land holdings to the Dominion of Canada would be more cost-effective than keeping them.

Trading and land control had never been easy for the Métis residents of Red River while the HBC was managing the area, but the Métis feared that a transfer to Canadian authority posed a threat to their language and culture. While the Métis negotiated with Canada over the transfer of power, English-speaking Protestant settlers from the east were moving into the colony and creating conflict. Given that the Canadian government was itself largely anglophone and Protestant, anxiety abounded that the Métis—who were a majority French Catholic—might lose everything.

Early sources of tension included efforts by Canadian surveyors to redraw property lines. The settlement had been organized in the French seigniorial manner of long rectangular lots so that each farm had access to the river. The English, however, favoured square lots that cut many parcels of land off from the water and community. Many Métis did not have a clear title to their land, and although Ottawa said it would respect occupancy rights, its promise was not kept. When William McDougall, an anglophone Canadian expansionist, was appointed lieutenant-governor of the territory, the trust broke down further.

It was at this critical juncture that Louis Riel became the spokesperson for the Métis. Riel and his resisters, a group that initially included both anglophones and francophones, held off the land surveyors and prevented the transfer of control to the Canadian government on 1 December 1869. The resistance seized control of Upper Fort Garry and held it until the government agreed to negotiate. A provisional government was formed with Louis Riel as its leader and talks began to bring the territory into Confederation.

The armed conflict at Upper Fort Garry continued into the winter and spring of 1870, with Riel maintaining control until he agreed to execute Thomas Scott, an English-speaking settler from Ontario. The execution cemented distrust and fury amidst the federal government, anglophones, and eastern Canadians toward Riel and his followers. Many Métis felt that Scott's execution undermined their position. Negotiations with the Canadian government continued but Riel was denied amnesty as part of their diplomacy and he eventually fled the country, fearing prosecution. This chain of events inspired the popular perception of Louis Riel as a traitor and a villain, an attitude that persisted for generations.

On 12 May 1870, the province of Manitoba joined the Canadian Confederation. The Canadian government assured the people of Red River that their land titles would be honoured and that 607,000 hectares of land would be held for their children. These promises were poorly enforced, when they were enforced at all, and what little confidence the people of Red River still had in the new Manitoba government diminished even further. Many from the settlement moved west.

Riel spent the intervening years in Quebec and various parts of the US, eventually ending up in Montana where he married, had children, and worked as a school teacher. In 1884 he was persuaded to return to Canada to help the Métis of what would become Saskatchewan resist the Canadian government survey and reallocation of their land. Many of the Saskatchewan Métis had moved west from the Red River Colony after the creation of Manitoba, and they were dismayed to experience the same old problems in their new home.

Riel's return marked the start of the five-month North-West Resistance, which started with the Battle of Duck Lake and the retreat of the North-West Mounted Police and ended with the three-day Battle of Batoche that effectively put an end to the resistance. Riel surrendered to the Canadian militia and was tried and executed in Regina in April 1885.

### *Names and Terms*

**Coueurs des bois** were unlicensed fur traders. They were known as “wood-runners” in English and “bush-lopers” to the Anglo-Dutch. Unlike *voyageurs*, *coueurs des bois* did not have permits from colonial authorities to engage in trade.

**Gabriel Dumont** (December 1837–19 May 1906) was a Métis leader and ally of Louis Riel who played a key role in the 1885 North-West Resistance. Dumont was born at the Red River Settlement and died in Bellevue, Saskatchewan.

**Fort Garry** was a Hudson's Bay Company trading post located at the junction of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers in what is now central Winnipeg, Manitoba.

**The Hudson's Bay Company** (HBC) was given its charter on 2 May 1670, making it the oldest merchandizing company in the English-speaking world. HBC was a fur-trading business for most of its history and played a significant role in the colonization of British North America and the creation of Canada.

**John A. Macdonald** (10 or 11 January 1815–6 June 1891) was the first prime minister of Canada. He was in office from 1867–1873 and then again from 1878–1891 and was the key figure within the Dominion government during the Red River and North-West Resistances. He was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and died in Ottawa.

**William McDougall** (25 January 1822–29 May 1905) was the expansionist lieutenant-governor of Rupert's Land and the North-Western Territory (the territories that would become Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and parts of Alberta) who espoused deep anti-Catholic and anti-Indigenous views. He was born in York, Upper Canada, and died in Ottawa, Ontario.

**Métis** are people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry and one of the three recognized Indigenous peoples of Canada.

**The North West Company** (NWC) was founded in 1779 and was part of the fur trade from the 1780s to 1821. The NWC was managed by Scottish immigrants living in Montreal and Empire Loyalists who came north to escape the American Revolution. The company relied on French Canadian labour.

**The Red River Colony** was a settlement at the Forks, where the Red and Assiniboine Rivers joined, and whose boundaries crossed parts of what are now Manitoba and North Dakota.

**Louis Riel** (22 October 1844–16 November 1885) was a Métis leader, an important figure in the Red River and North-West Resistances, and is considered the founder of Manitoba. Riel was born in St. Boniface, Red River Colony, and died in Regina, North-West Territories.

**Rupert's Land** was a far-reaching territory of northern wilderness that the Hudson's Bay Company effectively controlled from 1670 to 1870. Named for Prince Rupert, the HBC's first governor, it was primarily a trapping ground for the fur trade. In 1869 the Government of Canada acquired Rupert's Land, which encompassed roughly a third of what is now Canada, from the HBC. Rupert's Land eventually became parts of Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and Nunavut.

**Thomas Scott** (1 January 1842–4 March 1870) was an Irish Protestant born in Clondeboye, County Down, Ireland, and moved to the Red River Colony in 1869, joining the Canadian Party. Scott was convicted

of treason and executed by the Métis National Committee's provisional government on 4 March 1870.

**Voyageurs** were 18th- and 19th-century French Canadian trappers who transported furs by canoe during the North American fur trade. Voyageurs were licensed to transport goods to forts and posts but were usually forbidden to do any trading of their own.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### *History, Story, and Writing*

The playwright inserts details that suggest her play isn't totally true, such as calling where the women live "the Reddish River" rather than the Red River. Can you find other examples of this in the text? What are some of the reasons why the playwright might want you to remember that you're reading fiction?

At the end of the play, Eugenia says that history is written by the victors. What does this mean to you? If this play is about the "losers," the people whose stories didn't get to be recorded, then is it still history, or is it something else?

Several characters in this play are shown reading, writing, or dictating letters. What do you think it's like to watch a play in which so much information comes from characters reciting or dictating letters?

Marie-Angelique's letters are dictated to Cecilia, who writes them out with neat handwriting; the replies that Marie-Angelique thinks are from Louis Riel are actually written by Thomas Scott. Does this diminish the authenticity of the letters' content? What do you make of the fact that it's the two white settler characters doing the writing on behalf of the two Métis characters?

### *Stage Space and Social Status*

Why do you think the playwright has the women sitting in a particular order? How does it relate to their identity or status? What do you make of the fact that after Marie-Angelique is able to leave the room Eugenia takes her chair and moves it so close to Cecilia?

Who can leave the fort and who can't? Why do you think this is significant? Why do you think the women are always on stage, even when Louis Riel and Thomas Scott have scenes together in locations that are not the fort?

Visualize how you think the stage would look during a performance. How else might the play be using relationships in space to represent relationships between people or ideas?

### *Treason and Betrayal*

Near the end of the play, the women call Louis Riel both a traitor and a hero; why would he be both?

The play depicts Riel and Scott as having a friendlier relationship than they might have had in real life. This makes Scott's death feel like it's a personal betrayal as well as an act of political violence. Why insert this personal betrayal into the story?

Who else in this play is a traitor, and who else suffers betrayal? How do the characters handle betrayal? Why do you think some characters react to betrayal differently than others do?

### *Comedy and Tragedy*

Despite containing tragic situations, this play tells much of its story through comedy. What are some examples of scenes that seem designed to make you laugh at a serious situation? Why do you think the playwright would do that?

*Language*

The actions of Louis Riel and his Métis National Committee are most often labelled as a “resistance” at this time in history, but for many years they were called rebels and their actions labelled as rebellion. Using a good dictionary, look up the definition of “resistance” and “rebellion.” What are the key differences between these words? Why would it be advantageous for the 1870 Canadian government to use one instead of the other? What about the Métis?





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are probably a lot of people I should acknowledge here, because that is the respectful thing to do. Days before writing this acknowledgement, I read that you should keep an ongoing list of all the people you need to acknowledge. I wish I had read that sooner. Alas, I kept no such list, and so I would like to take over this section and turn it into an apology section, where I humbly beg for forgiveness for all the people I have forgotten to acknowledge. Besties, your contributions were legit unforgettable.





Frances Koncan is a writer of mixed Anishinaabe and Slovene descent from Couchiching First Nation in Treaty 3 territory, and currently living and working on Treaty 1 territory in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She learned to write by fighting with adults on the Internet in the late '90s before Internet safety was a consideration. Their theatrical career began in 2007 when they saw a production of *The Threepenny Opera* starring Alan Cumming and he accidentally touched her shoulder. In her free time, she likes playing video games and adding expensive luxury goods to her online shopping cart with no intention of ever checking out.