

Interview with Don McLean, Former Curriculum Developer and Researcher with the Gabriel Dumont Institute. It's November 18, 1997.

Don, What was your favorite GDI project?

Tough question. I guess I'd have to say it was when I was writing Home From The Hill. That would be, I think, in terms of my own contribution, that's the one I feel the best about.

Okay, and that was more or less your project from beginning to start?

Oh, ah.

There were people with GDI working involved in it?

Oh yeah, you know, we did everything together pretty well. Ah, I mean writing a book is kind of the thing that in the end is the responsibility of one person, you can't have a whole group of people write a book but the material that I used, a lot of it was gathered up years previous to my work there by a guy named Ron Bourgeault.

...

And Ron had spent a number of years in Ottawa in Public Archives of Canada and he dug up material helter skelter for years and years and a library was put together. A Metis library made up initially of all of these documents that Bourgeault from Public Archives of Canada, and that became the mother lode of our data because it was original and we set about and I set about specifically and the Governor of New Brunswick, and Stanley, George R.G. Stanley and Stanley's work was done from the McDonald papers. Sir John McDonald papers so it was pretty obviously biased so I said okay what we'll do here is, we'll start off with, with that history.

Okay.

The standard recognized history.

The birth of western Canada.

Yes, the birth of western Canada. And that will be the basis upon which everything else evolves. Then we went through. I had a friend by the name of Martin Schulman who worked there for a couple of years and this guy was a very well-educated Torontonionian. We weighed about three hundred pounds and I'm tall and skinny so they called us the Don & Martin Show but anyway Martin was a genius when it come to picking gems out of this huge pile of data that Bourgeault had brought.

.....

So going through this data we found that we could in fact document and create a counter-history that went against everything that George F.G. Stanley basically said.

Okay, so it said that the Metis were primitive people and that they couldn't evolve and that they were savage? and you proved otherwise, that they could evolve and they were't necessarily primitive people they just were a traditional people, I believe that's kind of what you're arguing, am I right?

Okay, George F. G. Stanley's argument. Now he went to not Cambridge, the other great English institution.

Oxford.

Yes and his Ph.D. dissertation which was done prior to World War II was for its time and place seen by academics as progressive work

Okay

because prior to that time Social Darwinism was the dominant paradigm of thought.

....

Which meant some people are born savage

Yeah

dumb, all of those, all of those preindustrial things.

...

Some people are born smart, postindustrial people and so what George F.G. Stanley did, was he said no-no-no, this was not at all true, you don't look at biological determinism, you look at cultural determinism.

Yeah

And they are culturally inferior and everywhere in the world where an inferior culture met a superior culture there was a clash. That was his way of soft-soaping the whole epoch of colonialism

Yeah

Okay, of explaining it away.

Yeah, and that's an elaboration of the frontier thesis basically.

Exactly, so our work basically ignored all the bullshit.

Okay

By this time those questions are no longer tenable or no longer debated

Yeah

And so we went ahead and literally rewrote the history of the Metis people from the documents and from our previous/police files that had been buried and you know sad thing was there wasn't a heck of a lot you could get about stuff beyond the lives of the elders, from the Metis people themselves because they were educated in the white man's schools

Yes

And they had bought the myth to the same extent as, as the white people had.

Yeah

So we had documented it all and we dug up documents from a lot of western documents as well from Calgary and from Prince Albert. This was where we found in Prince Albert, Mark Schulman and I found how it was that Lawrence Clark was in fact paid agent provocateur for the federal government.

Okay, and that kind of leads us into the next question. What caused you to write 1885 Metis Rebellion and Government Conspiracy and what is the book's theme?

That was the most exciting period of my entire life beyond doubt

Okay

Because I began to detect a conspiracy. I, I mean, here was the thing. The federal government needed a rebellion to justify further funding for the CPR. CPR was absolutely broke and the nation stated Canada depended upon the completion of the CPR through to the west coast, and Great Britain depended upon the completion of the railway to the west coast so its war needs and that strange war with Afghanistan. but that war didn't materialize. It was going to war with Russia and it needed that railroad now. It was being funded by the public that owned by a few private capitalists. Donald Smith and a couple of other sick characters for the CPR so I smelled a rat all along that somehow or other that three hundred people do not take on the might of the British Empire unless they are forced into a corner and have the first shot fired at them. That's precisely what happened. So I began to, and this is a theory, I began to look for documentation and by God we began to find it.

....

And the more we looked, the more we found, and even pinpointed Lawrence Clark as the agent provocateur. We got the letters from the government naming this man, we've got this man Lawrence Clark saying what this country needs is a war with the Metis to restore prosperity to

the Prince Albert region. So when we went with Martin Schulman up to Prince Albert the Institute wasn't too fond of this whole theory because remember we're funded with government funds.

Yeah. you don't want to

Now we always have to face it, we're always sandwiched between this, the needs of Metis people on one hand and the government funding on the other. This scared a lot of people into inaction and it really froze the Institute for a long time until we began to deal with it. What happened was, I had some really really good bosses there by the name of Ken White and Dr. Curry, Walter Curry. These guys, it was their job to (1) keep the Institute running so it could serve the Metis people, they didn't want too much and no one could blame them. They didn't want too much radical stuff coming out of here that's going to scare away government funding, that was always the fine line they had to walk. In any event on this summer trip three days into that little archive in Prince Albert we found that it was in fact it was Lawrence Clark who had been appointed to go to Ottawa to bring the bill of rights that had been drawn up in 1885 by Riel and Jackson, his well-educated white counterpart. This bill of rights went to Ottawa where McDonald denied ever receiving it as the war broke out. And Lawrence Clark the very man who said we need a war to bring prosperity back to the north west where he had a lot of land as well as being an employee of the Hudson Bay Company. He's the man that went. We found that he was in fact appointed by a Metis trader, a priest by the name of Father Andre.

Okay

And Andre was a trader only because of church dogma. He felt Riel you know was going astray, etc, we all know that. In any event, he sent, with the blessings of the Metis people, Lawrence Clark to Ottawa because he thought he's a conservative big wig, he's got all the inside dope, he's got all the inside track, he's married to a McKay woman, a Scottish half-breed. He'll do us okay. He went to Ottawa, betrayed them, came back, told Dumont there were 500 hundred police on the way to arrest Riel and literally caused the first shot to be fired in the Rebellion and then we're out with the Prince Albert volunteers thinking that these Metis people ain't got what it takes and we all know what happened at Duck Lake and the Metis people fought back and they laid one damn good licking on the cops and the volunteers there.

They did.

And the Rebellion began and Lawrence Clark lived to survive this and lived to get rich from it as did Donald Smith and the CPR because they gall-dang used that Rebellion as the reason for more public funding and the troops were brought out to Winnipeg on the CPR so what the Rebellion did was, it, the end result of the Rebellion was not to benefit the Metis people, unfortunately it benefited the frigging CPR

CPR

The CPR was That was government funding. That was essentially what took place. Why it happened was because we smelled a rat and we began to find all kinds of data to support the

theory. Other people had talked about it, as a maybe, saying wasn't it a fortunate turn of events for McDonald.

Yeah.

Okay, I guess I'm over answering.

Okay. No,no,no, obviously though your thinking hasn't changed since you initially wrote the book in 1985 was it or 83.

No, I think, yeah, sorry, 1885 book came out in 1985, unfortunately it was a little bit too late for the, we had a 1885 and after seminar with all the academics across Canada and his worship himself, George F.G.Stanley, and the book was unfortunately three weeks late in coming out so I didn't have it there so they basically wrote me off.

But I do notice that most of the fundamentals of your argument have been carried on by D.N. Sprague in Canada and the Metis 1869 & 1885.

Has he?

Yeah.

At that time Sprague was my only ali.

Yeah.

Sprague has a Ph.D. in history

....

Sprague is very much part of the establishment in the academic world, not to knock him. He's a fine, fine man but when push came to shove at that particular time, he as a Ph.D. at the University of Winnipeg was really had to sort of back off on the conspiracy theory. None of the historians will put up with it, they can't stand the conspiracy theory because they can't deal with it, it doesn't fit the Marxists theoretical perspective, it doesn't fit anybody's theoretical perspective and so they tend to throw these conspiracies away saying they never happened well we all know that's the way the bloody world runs.

And also..

But Sprague did, I'm glad to see that he's come back. He's come back and is full support again because he knew, he knew as well as I did that that conspiracy was a fact.

And also I think Sprague and yourself and others, the fact that you discredited John A. McDonald, he's a hero to many historians in Canada

Yes

And people don't like to see their heroes in a bad light

No, they don't

You know, he's been so glorified

Absolutely.

In a lot of ways he was a good leader, but in a lot of other ways he was an insufficient leader.

Sir John A. McDonald was the type of fellow that that had Riel met him, had the Metis folks met him, they unfortunately probably would've liked him because he was firey, high-spirited and had a lot of balls

Yeah.

He had a great sense of humour. He's an alcoholic. He was a human being but, but he was old school and he had like most of the Highland Scottish, I can say this because I am one he had a bit of a split personality, other side of that was real tough assed warrior.

Yeah.

And so, you know, I always felt too bad about having to expose Sir John A. because I liked him as a guy.

Yeah.

But what he did, he did out of necessity and his terms, in his terms,

Yes, and

you want to finish, you want to create Canada as a nation

Yes.

there's going to be a fall guy here, it's going to be Louis Riel and I'm going to kill him.

And he had to...

And he did kill him, and he made damn good and sure that it was a kangaroo court. He appointed the judge to execute him and said, "He shall hang or every dog in Quebec shall bark and by Jesus the ghost of Riel drives Canadian politics today. Riel was, without question, not just the father of Manitoba, okay, but in many, many ways father of Canadian of democracy.

Yes, he was a ...

And he was executed in cold blood by McDonald and no way do I stick up for Sir John here this is John's other side, the killer side. And the Orange, he satisfied the Orange, the Protestant Orangemen of Ontario. You see Riel didn't want to execute that wild Irishman, what was his name

Thomas Scott

Thomas Scott. Riel didn't want to execute him, but Scott was such a bastard and even in the jail he was deriding and bullying the guards and finally a guard said, "Look, if you don't shoot him, I will", and then I'll shoot you, so Riel had no choice, he had to execute Scott. In any event. I thought, time and time again throughout, and I should have documented it. I thought, time and time again throughout those documents from the west here where someone had asked Riel for amnesty and without exception the man spared the lives of the people that he had the power to save, without exception, during the war and all. In fact, it was Riel who had stopped the, the slaughter at Duck Lake. This was a humanitarian far more so than Sir John and but technically, technically speaking, Riel was the father of Manitoba, and the first expression of Canadian discontent against the plans of the McDonald's federal government, plans that later became known as the Canadian policy.

Yeah.

Alright, we'll continue with the interview here, ah. I guess we already touched upon Home from the Hill and you mentioned the development of this project and certainly your most ambitious of GDI project by far. I would like you maybe to elaborate more about why there was a need for this book. Ah, you chose to analyze the best of Metis history rather than the two great resistances and why was this so, I mean generally books about the Metis concentrated on the 1869 and 1885, whereas you're probably the second or third person who decided to analyze all Metis history or at least you know ah a good two/three hundred years of Metis history.

Yeah, well, the only way they got away with this information was by plucking the 1885 out of its context and when you take a phenomenon and examine it in isolation apart from its context you're not kidding anybody, I mean you're kidding everybody, and you shouldn't be. I mean, that is a fault with, you know, a lot of western, with historians, that's a fault with a lot of western science. The way western people study things is by putting it into a level or tory and study it in isolation

....

and so they tried very hard to study 1885 Rebellion, so called Rebellion, in isolation. They chopped it out of its context. Ah, and so it was natural for a sociologist, I guess, to examine it only within its historical context.

The fact that the Metis were already resisting against coercive authority as early as 1811 and 1812, that this fits in the pattern of 1849, it all fits together.

This fits a pattern that goes much beyond the Metis as a people, this fits an historical pattern

Yes.

Ah, if you look at the growth of capitalism, I'm not a Communist, yet I want to walk in historical terms. I want to talk about capitalism as a social order. Capitalism, as we all know, went through some pretty rough times in its beginnings, and what happened was that at the very beginning of the fur trade, it was extremely labor intensive and the Metis came into being basically, in terms of economics, as a work force for the fur trade companies. They were ideal being half Indian and half white. They combined the skills from both groups and were uniquely suited to the fur trade.

Everything went fine, of course, there was virtually no racism, I mean, no practicing racism because people were marrying Cree women

Yeah.

and the offspring were their own children, and this is the very stuff that prevents racism. There were still some, of course, from the colonial epoch and the British feeling of superiority and the French too. They were not scot-free on that but in any event, the Metis came into being as a work force for the fur trading companies and that no problem really arrived until 1814 or was it 1816 when the two companies amalgamated.

1821.

Yeah, 1821 and at that time and guess what. The first surplus population in North America. A group of people who could no longer be fitted in and exploited as workers for the fur trade company and so they had to be shuffled aside. That, by and large, was the French-speaking Metis who went out onto the plains and became hunters. And became more closely associated with the Indian side of their ancestry than did the Scottish half-breeds, Metis who by and large stayed in Red River and were kept on with their parent company, the Hudson's Bay Company, that's the one that took over the amalgamation. So that's basically what happened. After 1821, that's when the racism really emerged and it became part of Simpson, the governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, became part of his daily letters, how we no longer are going to mollycoddle these people, etc.

Mmhm

So, what I'm saying is that racism always has some association with the economics of the time. It does today, it did then. As people become unemployed and drop out of the work force today by the thousands and by the hundreds of thousands and by the millions, ah, there is an ideology building up against these people. We were talking earlier about how things are getting mean again.

Yeah.

And it's because of the, of the horrendous revolutionary aspect of capitalism as it moves into the new millennium where people are being replaced by electronics now and by computers by the millions. In fact, it's such a powerful force that we can't begin to comprehend it. More and more people are being shuffled aside as surplus labor as the Metis were in 1821. And once again, we see things turning mean.

Yes, so that will be finished..... Mmhm, okay now Home from the Hill what would you say the theme of the book is, and does this theme apply to today's Metis.

Yeah, basically what I was just talking about. You know, what I was just talking about, was what I tried really to show, ah, in Home from the Hill by putting it all into context, and to show that after the racism and after the Metis were shuffled aside by the new farming economy, by the new agricultural economy, they no longer could be fitted in, could be fitted in and exploited, excuse me.

Therefore, they were vilified

They were vilified at that point, to the point where they literally had to rebel in order to survive. Much as has/is taking place in many of the third world countries again today.

So the struggle is ongoing, it just takes different forms

Different forms. Hopefully, hopefully, people will begin to understand some of these forces that effect them. And hopefully people will begin to see a bit of light as the new millennium approaches, and understand what racism is, what its roots are, and what an absolute and utter fallacy it is.

Yeah, and that is why we need history and to show what happened in the past so we can rectify the problems of today.

Absolutely. I mean, the thing is, it's totally connected.

Yeah, okay, could you tell me the societal contexts which had an impact upon your writing at this time, was the larger society ready for a Metis run educational institute when you were working at G.D.I. in the early 90's.

Well, I've always been a rebel. I guess I was born a rebel.