

**“Métis History: Emerging from the Shadows or How a non-Métis
Discovered ‘True’ Métis History”**

Distinguished guests, colleagues and dear friends: *taanshi, welcome and willkommen* to my presentation.

I would like to start by mentioning that my abstract for this discussion, as well as my presentation title, has changed.

Since 1997, I have been an employee of the Gabriel Dumont Institute, a Métis educational and cultural institution based in Saskatchewan, Canada. The Institute or “GDI,” as it known back home, has just celebrated its 25th anniversary and is the only institution of its kind in Canada. We are a non-profit organization, fully owned and operated by the province’s Métis community. GDI’s overall mission is to preserve, promote and revitalize Métis culture and to empower the Métis through enhanced educational opportunities. The Institute is affiliated with both of Saskatchewan’s universities, as well as SIAST, the province’s technical/vocational institution. Our two largest programs, the Dumont Technical Institute and the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program, have graduated hundreds of Métis students who have not only empowered themselves but their communities as well. In addition, GDI also has perhaps the largest Métis-specific library and archival collection held by any Métis institution. If any of you want to know more about the Institute, I have brought some information that you may take. Please go to our home website www.gdins.org for further background information.

I work in GDI’s Publishing Department. My Department plays a multifaceted role within the Institute: we are a literary publisher, a curriculum development and research unit, an archival and curatorial centre and a cultural resource producer. Our collective endeavours are imperative for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most important is that the Métis are

struggling to overcome generations of colonialism and its negative adjuncts: racism, discrimination, poverty, lack of educational opportunities and various social pathologies. This invariably means the loss of languages and culture. As a result, GDI works with the province's Métis community to preserve and promote Métis culture. One area of particular concern is the near extinction of the three Michif languages: Michif-Cree, Michif-French and Ile-à-la Crosse Michif. Métis Elders tell us that without being able to speak a Michif language you are unable to fully understand the Michif worldview that includes a rich Oral Tradition, and a whole panoply of folklore, healing traditions, spiritual systems, communitarian values, and harvesting strategies. This loss of cultural retention is also heightened by a demographic shift that indicates that the Métis birthrate – like that of the province's First Nations – is much higher than that of the larger population. So much so that by 2040, a majority of people in Saskatchewan will be Aboriginal.

This is the cultural milieu in which our Department works. Since the need to produce high-calibre, culturally-affirming and Métis-specific resources is so vital, there is a great deal of pressure to produce results. At first this proved, for myself, an almost insurmountable task. My academic training, with specialization in Canadian History and Political Science, provided me with a number of key skills, particularly how to write and analyze and interpret complex information. However, it also left me ill-prepared for a career in Métis Studies. I thought that I knew everything that I needed to know about Métis history and culture. How wrong and terribly naïve I was! My time at the academy centred on implicitly Eurocentric history courses. When Aboriginal peoples were mentioned in the historical narrative, these efforts focused on Contact, the Fur Trade and their eventual marginalization through the Dominion of Canada's state-building policies. Reading Canadian history textbooks in the 1990s, you would think that from 1885 until the 1960s, Aboriginal peoples almost disappeared from the national narrative.

I had to learn all the central tenets of Métis history and culture while on the job. These include the unique and beautiful Michif languages and the Métis' syncretistic folklore system that blends Canadian or *canayen* and Algonquian worldviews. Moreover, the well-known "Road Allowance" experience following the 1885 Resistance was not mentioned in any of my textbooks nor was the Métis scrip system. A crash course on these experiences had to be learned. In fact, my real historical and cultural education started the day I was hired at GDI. My cultural knowledge, such as it is, has been taught to me by a network that includes Elders and Michif speakers, my co-workers and community people who have shared so many of their life-stories with our Department and the Institute.

After absorbing all I could from community people and reading prodigious amounts of Métis history, I tried to craft my own way to better understand Métis history and culture. My first printed introduction to Métis Studies began with Howard Adams, Maria Campbell and Beatrice Culleton. This troika formed the basis of my knowledge of Métis colonization and helped me understand the mindset of the colonized and brought back memories of Albert Memmi, and Toussaint Louverture, and other "liberation" figures from my university days. I then began to blend oral history with my historical training. Like other Indigenous and traditional cultures, the Métis transmit historical, social and cultural knowledge through Elders or the "Old People" as they are also known. From there, I weaved my academic training in Canadian history, focusing on printed documents enthused with the Métis' Oral Tradition. This can be hard because the two do not always form a coherent synthesis.

I then began to look for long-term trends, sometimes using the *longue durée* approach in order to better understand the Métis' past. Parallels with other societies in both time and place became important. For instance, I began to think about how the Métis experience is parallel with other Indigenous and popular insurrectionary movements such as those in the US West, Latin

America, the Patriotes of 1837-38 of Lower Canada and even the uprisings of early modern Europe. One thing that struck me was that the Métis Nation was born in a period of international revolution and nation building. As a result, it was also no coincidence that the Métis Nation was also crushed by the nascent Canadian state in 1870 and 1885. Finally, as a student of French-Canadian/Québec nationalism, I also noticed that the main theme of French-Canadian history – *“la survivance”* – the passionate and visceral desire to preserve language and culture at all costs – closely mirrors the main theme of Métis history – resistance. Some of you may notice that scholars specializing in Indigenous resistance have embraced this term as well.

After all of this came my epiphany. Métis history is a clandestine history, which has been hidden from the larger narratives of the colonizer and from the oppressed themselves. With this in mind, I then tried to figure out why so much Métis history had been obscured or erased. In the end, I concluded that there was no grand conspiracy. This was done simply because Canada, until quite recently, was not ready to include the Métis as a founding people worthy of full inclusion in our national narrative. For instance, early histories about the Métis focused exclusively on the machinations of Louis Riel and avoided the mass of participants involved in the Métis resistance movements of 1869-70 and 1885. The Métis were portrayed as childlike marionettes controlled by the manipulations of Riel as opposed to being active agents of their own will. They were also seen as a mass of static primitives who engaged, albeit heroically, in a rearguard action to prevent the onward march of civilization. This type of historical writing was in vogue from the 1890s until well after the Second World War. In the 1960s, the way Canadians wrote history shifted and began to have a more inclusive sense of the past. For the Métis, this has meant moving from political biographies to social-economic histories based on staples production (the fur trade, early Red River farming or the bison hunt), to community studies that employ social-science methodologies.

Métis history and historiography is now divided into the following themes: (1) the Métis as rebels or resisters, which focuses almost exclusively on Louis Riel (2) the Métis as children of the fur trade, (3) Métis Ethnogenesis and the creation of a “new”/distinct people (4) the so-called “Half-breed Dilemma” and the problems associated with having a mixed identity, (5) the Red River Métis’ alleged class/ethnic and sectarian cleavages and (6) Métis community studies. My own themes that I use when I discuss Métis history are resistance, persistence and adaptation. I am also interested in applying the “Imagined Communities” hypothesis of Benedict Anderson and others to the modern Métis Nation; however, I have not been able to write anything on this yet.

GDI works to recover hidden historical narratives and reconstruct them with the help of the Métis community. As a consequence, much of what we do involves recovery work. We work with Elders and the rest of the Métis community and with a number of academic disciplines including Native Studies, History and Archeology to reconstruct Métis history and preserve and promote Métis culture. We do this through the publication of books, for all ages and education levels, and cultural resources such as videos and music CDs, and website production. Because of the Internet’s near universal accessibility, the Institute recognizes that perhaps the best means to tell Métis history and to present Métis culture is on the World Wide Web. GDI has developed four websites that focus on Métis culture, history and pedagogy. The Institute’s intent in developing these websites is to showcase our large collection of community photographs, oral histories and learning resources. Perhaps most importantly, we feel that we are making a conscious effort to restore the Métis’ voice and are providing the Métis community with the opportunity to share their stories in a culturally-sensitive and inclusive forum.

The first website is *The Virtual Museum of Métis Museum of History and Culture* (www.metismuseum.ca). Operational since 2003, this website is the

most comprehensive attempt to chronicle Métis history and culture on the World Wide Web. It contains thousands of photographs and hundreds of oral histories. Our two most popular sections focus on *New Breed Magazine*, which is the social, economic, cultural voice of the province's Métis and our Métis-specific photograph partnership with the Saskatchewan Archives Board. This website is based on a website entitled *The Virtual Museum of New France*, which is operated by the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The website has well over 3,000 original visitors a month. Our website tracker tells us that governments in Canada and the United States are regular users of the website. This is important because, in our modest way, we can help inform governments about Métis history and culture.

The second website is *The Back to Batoche Interactive Website*. This website, funded by *The Virtual Museum of Canada*, was developed primarily for middle-years learners. My colleague David Morin has worked very hard to ensure that this website has interactive activities which are both fun and engaging.

The third website, *Métis Studies 10*, was developed by the Dumont Technical Institute. It is the only website developed with an exclusive Métis-specific pedagogy.

I encourage each of you to view and use the resources on these websites. Happy surfing!

Danke! Marsi!