

The Métis Nation of Canada: Emerging from the Shadows

Article by Darren R. Préfontaine

The Métis are an indigenous nation of mixed Amerindian (First Nations), French-Canadian, and European heritage.¹ The Métis Homeland consists of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario, the Northwest Territories and Montana and North Dakota. At present, there are approximately 350,000 Métis in Canada, who mostly live in Western Canada's larger cities. The Canadian constitution presently recognizes three Aboriginal peoples: Indians (First Nations), Inuit (Eskimos) and Métis.

Métis Ethnogenesis, or self-identity, emerged in the mid 1750s in the Great Lakes region. However, the formal creation of the Métis Nation occurred in the 1790s and early 1800s in what is now Manitoba and North Dakota. Throughout the early 1800s, the Métis challenged the Hudson's Bay Company's attempts to curb their lifestyle as unlicensed voyageurs and bison hunters. This resistance culminated in the "Battle of Seven Oaks" on June 19, 1816 when the Métis or "Bois-brûlés" defeated a party of Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) employees and Selkirk Settlers in what is now Winnipeg, Manitoba. This event was the formal birth of "*la nouvelle nation*," the Métis Nation. Métis self-identity further blossomed from the 1820s to 1850s, as hundreds of Red River Métis and Scots/Orkney Half-breeds² began working as free traders, bison hunters and farmers. During this time, the Métis called themselves "*gens de libre*." Imbued with a sense of nationhood and freedom, many of these *gens de libre* circumvented the HBC's fur trade monopoly in the 1830s-40s, fought the Dakota (Sioux) for access to the rich bison-hunting grounds of the Dakotas in the 1840s-50s and resisted the Canadian state from 1869-1885.

The nineteenth century was a period of nation building and for Indigenous peoples the world over, a period of resistance to non-inclusive state building. This impulse was at the centre of the clashes in 1869-1870 and in 1885. In 1869, the Métis, in what is now Manitoba, were not consulted about the transfer of their homeland (Rupert's Land) to the new Dominion of Canada. Angered, they formed a Provisional Government that was eventually led by Louis Riel, a Métis educated in Montréal. The Provisional Government, which was made-up of French-Métis and English Half-breeds, negotiated with the Dominion Government for Rupert's Land's formal entry into the Canadian Confederation. From these negotiations emerged *The Manitoba Act* in 1870,

¹ Métis culture is a dynamic fusion of Cree, Ojibwa, French-Canadian and Scots/Orkney parent cultures and includes a rich Oral Tradition and folklore, healing traditions, spiritual systems, communitarian values, harvesting strategies and languages including Michif, a mixed language based on Cree verb structures and French nouns/noun phrases and Métis-French, a dialect of Canadian French. Most Métis, however, are presently Anglophones and do not speak these or any of their other heritage languages.

² A derogatory term historically used by Anglophones to describe both English and French Métis.

which the Métis saw as a treaty between the Métis Nation and Canada. The act provided for English and French denominational schools, judicial and parliamentary systems and the surrender of the Métis' "Indian" title to the land, through the granting of 1.4 million acres of land. Similar measures were put in place to extinguish the Métis' "Indian" title in the North-West Territories.³

After 1870, increasing racism within Manitoba forced hundreds of Métis to move to present-day Saskatchewan and Alberta. Despite moving west, the Métis' many grievances – such as not having their land tenure recognized, lack of political representation and poor economic conditions – led them to send dozens of petitions to the federal government. Their pleas for redress were received with silence. In 1884, the Métis brought Louis Riel back to Canada in order to negotiate their grievances with Ottawa; a year later the Northwest Resistance broke out. After having the upper hand early on – due to Gabriel Dumont's leadership – at Duck Lake (March 26) and Fish Creek (April 25), the Métis succumbed to the larger, better-equipped Canadian volunteer force at Batoche on May 12, 1885.

After the 1885 Resistance, the Métis were completely marginalized. As immigrant farmers took up land in Western Canada, the Métis were erased from public consciousness. Many Métis dispersed to parkland and forested regions, while others squatted on land along the approaches to roads in rural areas of Western Canada. Hence, the Métis began to be called the "Road Allowance People" and settled in dozens of makeshift communities throughout Canada's three Prairie Provinces. In most instances, they didn't own title to the land and thus paid no taxes, which precluded their children from obtaining an education. With this marginal existence emerged a myriad of social problems including poor health and self-esteem, and a lack of viable employment opportunities. Most Métis also suppressed their heritage after 1885 because there was a strong social stigma to being Métis throughout the early twentieth century. The dominant Anglophone society viewed Métis as "primitive," child-like rebels who no longer had a place in Canadian (read Anglo and Protestant) society. As a result, many hid their Métis heritage and called themselves "French" or "Scottish" to escape racism and poverty. From the 1930s to 1950s, government tried to help the Métis overcome their poverty and social marginalization, but these efforts proved paternalistic⁴ and were largely failures.

³ In Canada, before settlement could occur by Euro-Canadians and Europeans, the British Crown treated with Indian populations through treaties to extinguish their "Indian" title to the land. The Métis' "Indian" title to the land was surrendered through scrip, certificates in either land or monetary denominations. However, most Métis did not receive their land because the system was fraudulent. This would make the Métis squatters on their own land.

⁴ In the 1940s, for instance, the Province of Alberta built Métis Settlements to address the Métis' social and economic marginalization. These settlements didn't really become self-governing and autonomous until the 1980s. Saskatchewan also had "Métis Farms" throughout the 1950s and 1960s, however, these were an abject failure and were marred by mismanagement and paternalism.

During the 1960s, however, the Métis entered Canada's mainstream. In the 1960s-70s, Métis political organizations empowered their communities, while increasing numbers of Métis moved to urban centres. In addition, the period produced a number of talented Métis authors and activists – including Maria Campbell, Howard Adams and Beatrice Culleton – who challenged Canadian society's racism towards the Métis. In 1982, the culmination of two decades of Métis activism, by both grassroots community people and political organizations, led to inclusion of the Métis into the repatriated Canadian Constitution. This constitutional recognition led to a renewed sense of pride in being Métis after a century of marginalization and societal racism. Since 1982, the Métis have worked towards the building of self-governing institutions, obtaining land bases and having their Aboriginal rights such as animal harvesting restored through the courts.

In recent years, the Métis have had a more prominent place in Canadian public life. For instance, their hero Louis Riel, once seen by Euro-Canadians as a "rebel," a "madman" and an "apostate" is now viewed as a "Canadian hero." In addition, most Canadians also feel that his execution was unjust and that he should be posthumously exonerated. Furthermore, the Métis are now having their inherent Aboriginal rights restored through litigation. The most important of these recent court cases was the 2003 Supreme Court of Canada ruling on Métis hunting known as the "Powley Case." In Powley, the Supreme Court of Canada argued that the Métis of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario possess "Indian" hunting rights. This means that Métis across Canada will soon have the right to harvest fauna in much the same way as "Status"⁵ First Nations. In addition, the Métis' birthrate is also much higher than the Canadian average – so much so that by 2040, a majority of people in Saskatchewan and Manitoba will likely be Aboriginal. As a result, the Métis are starting to gain political power. Because of these demographic projections, all levels of government have been working with the Métis to build self-governing structures. This will mean increased capacity building for Métis educational and cultural institutions such as Saskatchewan's Gabriel Dumont Institute (where the author works) and Manitoba's Louis Riel Institute, as well as for Métis political organizations. After 120 years, the Métis have emerged from the shadows and have recently returned to the national spotlight as one of Canada's founding peoples.

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⁵ In Canada, the federal government has awarded "Aboriginal" or "Indian" status to some groups such as certain First Nations (those whose ancestors signed Indian treaties) and to Inuit. These rights have been historically denied to both the Métis and to Non-Status Indians. This imposed rights regime has enabled some Aboriginal people to receive benefits from the federal government, while denying benefits to others.

Further Reading:

Barkwell, Lawrence J., Dorion, Leah and Préfontaine, Darren R., Editors. *Métis Legacy*. Winnipeg and Saskatoon: The Louis Riel Institute and the Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2001; Campbell, Maria. *Stories of the Road Allowance People*. Penticton, British Columbia, 1995; Peterson, Jacqueline and Brown, Jennifer, S. H., Editors. *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*. Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press, 1993; Shore, Fred J., and Barkwell, Lawrence, J., Editors. *Past Reflects the Present: The Métis Elders' Conference*. Winnipeg: Manitoba Métis Federation Inc, 1997.