

Métis Historiography

The historiography of the Métis has reflected some of the trends that have occurred in general Canadian history writing over the last hundred or so years. This has meant moving from political biographies of individuals, to social-economic histories based on staples production (the fur trade, early farming or the bison hunt), to community studies that employ social science methodologies. Within these parameters the recorded history of the Métis includes the following themes: (1) the Métis as rebels or resisters, which has focused almost exclusively on Louis Riel (2) the Métis as children of the fur trade or as "people in between" (3) the creation of a "new"/distinct people, and (4) Métis community studies. A Saskatchewan-based historian, Jim Miller, aptly coined the phrase "From Riel to the Métis" when discussing the evolution of historical writing about the Métis. Enthused with the Great Man of History School, with its penchant for celebrating history by great or notorious individuals, 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 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.