

Cuthbert James Grant (1793-1854)

For over two centuries, the Métis have been ignored in the historiography, or their accounts of historical events have been dismissed, or they have been portrayed in a pejorative way. We have now begun to retrieve the Michif accounts and use the Michif language to name historical places and events.

In 1816, the Métis defended their right to free trade as an Indigenous people. When the North West Company (NWC) leader “Wapeston”¹ was confronted and attacked by Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) forces led by 39 year-old Robert Semple, an unscrupulous opportunist, British loyalist, and travel writer born in Boston Massachusetts, the Michif, Canayens (French Canadians), and Chippewa men with Chief Maug-e-gaw-bow, all led by Cuthbert Grant, held their ground and fought back.

The victory of *prayrii di la Goornouyayr* (Frog Plain) or the Battle of Seven Oaks as the lii’ Zanglias call it took place on June 19, 1816. It was a culmination of the Pemmican Wars and the escalating fur trade disputes between the HBC and the NWC.

Up until 1990, this battle was referenced in Canadian history books as a “massacre.” Historians such as Lyle Dick (1991, 1994), after careful reading of the Coltman Commission’s (1819) investigation and report, began to reference this event as an incident or a battle rather than a massacre. These historians did this with a fair degree of trepidation since they received a considerable push-back from the mainstream academic community. The Michif people, of course, knew the true story which had been continuously celebrated through the songs of Pierriche Falcon, the Michif Rhymester (Chartrand, 2009). What still remains uncelebrated is the lone Michif martyr of this battle, Joseph Létendre dit Batoche, a sixteen-year-old teenager, killed by Semple’s men during the battle.

Governor Semple and twenty of his men killed on Frog Plain. Cuthbert and the Métis then took Fort Douglas. Cuthbert offered settlers who wanted to leave the Red River Settlement protection. He was later to face charges in Montreal arising from the fight but never actually went to trial. While Cuthbert was away his wife Elizabeth McKay and their son disappeared and were never heard from again.

Grant was charged for his part in the confrontation at Seven Oaks and taken to court, but the charges were dismissed. Coltman later stated that “Grant’s conduct ... only seemed to him to underline the dangerous policy the NWC had been pursuing in using the Métis for its own ends” This statement not only reflects the close alliance between the Métis and the NWC, but also suggests that the company viewed the Métis as a group which, if properly controlled, would provide services which would benefit the company.

Also known as “Wapeston” (White Ermine), Cuthbert Grant Jr. was born in 1793, at Fort de la Rivière Tremblante. Cuthbert’s father, Cuthbert Sr. was a NWC partner and trader, his mother was a Métis Assiniboine-Cree woman. He had one brother, (James) and three sisters, (Josephite, Mary and Marie Marguerite). Cuthbert was married to Marie McGillis, the Métis daughter of Angus McGillis.

¹ Leader White Ermine, Cuthbert Grant



When Cuthbert's father died in 1799, in accordance with his father's will, William McGillivray, a NWC Director, became Cuthbert's guardian. Cuthbert was baptized October 12, 1801, at age eight in the Scottish Church on St. Gabriel Street in Montreal, a church his father donated money to help build. His father's will also stated that he wished his sons to be educated in Scotland. Several historians are of the opinion that despite conjecture that Cuthbert followed his brother to Scotland for his schooling, he would appear to have been educated in Montreal under McGillivray's supervision. Cuthbert Grant is thought to have been given medical training with the military by his uncle, Nor'Wester Alexander Grant, leader of the Glengarry Regiment, while he was taking his schooling in Quebec. Two of Grant's medicine chests are still extant, one is a country-made chest that he used to take with him on the buffalo hunt the other, likely acquired later is a fine brass-bound case.

Grant entered the company's service, probably about 1810 to work in the Montreal offices, and in 1812 he travelled to Fort William (Thunder Bay, Ont.) with the annual brigade. At the meeting of Montreal and wintering partners that summer, at age 19, he was assigned as clerk to the Upper Red River department. He was posted to the North West Company's Fort Espérance on the Qu'Appelle River under John Prtichard, where he was put in charge of a small outpost.

In 1812, there was a growing conflict between the two major companies, the HBC and the NWC. This year also marked the arrival of the first colonists. The Nor'Westers saw the colonists as a threat to the fur trade and supply of pemmican. The conflict grew. In 1814, Governor Miles Macdonald made a proclamation prohibiting the sale of pemmican from the Assiniboine, out of fear that the colony would starve. The NWC needed pemmican as food supply for the voyageurs. The Métis depended on the sale of pemmican to the Nor'Wester's to support their families. A second proclamation ordered a stop mounted men from the running of buffalo at the Red River Settlement. This was the Métis' customary mode of hunting, whereas the settlers hunted on foot. The Métis felt that they were the true owners of the Northwest and need not obey these laws. The Nor' Westers were, after all the "New Nation."

Cuthbert Grant, Peter Pangman, William Shaw and Nicholas Montour were appointed Captains of the Métis. In March 1816, the Métis appointed Cuthbert Grant as Captain-General of all the Half-Breeds (Métis). In May, Cuthbert and his men set out to Brandon House with the intention of destroying it. Peter Fidler of Brandon House recorded the first sighting of the Métis Flag. At half past noon about 48 Half-Breeds, Canayens, Freeman and Indians came riding on horseback with their flag flying. It was blue, about four feet square and had a white figure eight placed horizontally in the middle.

George Simpson was concerned about the conflict between the Sioux and the Métis living at Pembina and, knowing that Pembina would be south of the 49th parallel and thus in the U.S.A., he asked Grant for his help to establish a new community 29 kilometers west of Fort Garry. In 1824, he gave Cuthbert a large grant of HBC land for this purpose. This was in the district of White Horse Plains. They formed the community of Grantown with 80 Métis families who were displaced from Pembina. The people of Grantown (now St. François Xavier) supplied fur traders with pemmican, and being some of the best fighters, they acted as a buffer between the Sioux and the Red River Settlement.

In 1823, Cuthbert married Marie McGillis, the Métis daughter of Angus McGillis and Marguerite Notinikabon and established a permanent home in Grantown. They had the following children:

- Eliza b. 1821, married Henry Page.
- Nancy, b. 1823, married Charles Azure.
- Charles, b. 1824, married Euphrosine Gladu.
- Marie Rose, b. c. 1830, married Pierre Gariepy.
- Elizabeth, b. 1831, married William McKay.
- Anne, b. 1832, died 1834.
- Marguerite, b. 1833, married John Ross.
- [Charles] Cuthbert “Bay-ris”, b. 1835, married Marie Gingras.
- James, b. 1837, married Josette Gariepy.
- [Sophie] Caroline, b. 1839, married Francois Gariepy.
- Julie Rose, b. 1844, married Jean Baptiste Desjarlais.

Cuthbert built a flour mill along the banks of Sturgeon Creek, now known as “Grant’s Old Mill.” He was also a private freighter. In 1824, Grant transported goods by York Boats to and from Norway House and the Red River Settlement along with the voyageurs of Grantown.

The American Fur Trade Companies entering the Northwest were an ever-increasing problem. In July 1828, the HBC passed a resolution appointing Cuthbert Grant “Warden of the Plains,” to stop the illicit trade of furs in the Northwest. This position also included organizing buffalo hunts and protecting the settlement. In 1835, he was appointed to the Council of Assiniboia as the Métis representative. Grant was also responsible for negotiating treaties with the Dakota people.

In 1837, General James Dickson, a self-styled liberator of the Indian nations, proposed to raise an army of the Métis to march south to free the American Indian and establish an Indian kingdom in California. Grant provided him with guides to lead him into the U.S. and the General gave him his epaulets and sword.

Grantown’s religious ceremonies were held in Grant’s home until the first church was built in 1829. A larger church was built in 1833, right beside the humble one. Father Harper also used Grant’s home as a school, when instructing the children.

It is thought that Cuthbert received training in European medicine as a medical orderly with the Glengarry Regiment . Boucher who was Grant’s interpreter had been an Ensign in the Glengarry Regiment, serving under Grant’s uncle Alexander Grant, during the War of 1812. Later, when he returned to the west he was called upon to help the sick and wounded. Grant travelled far and wide to help families deal with epidemics of small pox and measles. He travelled with his medicine chest strapped behind him as he rescued people caught on the plains without food or medical help. His medicine chest along with his sword can now be seen at the Manitoba Museum.

In his latter years, Cuthbert Grant served as counselor and magistrate. At age 59, he served once more as Governor of the buffalo hunt. In 1854, Grant was injured in a fall from his horse. On July 15, 1854, he died much to the sorrow of the Métis of Grantown. The people of Grantown

honoured him by burying him under the altar of the church. Later the church burnt down and it is said that Highway #26 now covers Cuthbert Grant, the first leader of the Métis Nation.

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