

Pamphlet # 7

The Métis: Birth of the Nation-1780-1821 *Fred J. Shore*¹

The actual means by which the birth of the Métis Nation occurred is a subject of some controversy. The usual account is that the North West Company, anxious to destabilize and defeat the Hudson's Bay Company under the leadership of Lord Selkirk, convinced the Métis that they were a Nation and that the HBC was stealing their land. The Métis, suitably impressed by the attention of the Nor'Westers, reacted by defeating the HBC at the Battle of Seven Oaks. The implication inherent in this version of the events is that the Métis were incapable on their own of creating a Nation unless someone smarter than themselves explained the process to them.

Given the propensity of many Canadian historians to refer to the Métis as 'half-breeds', such an interpretation should not be a cause for surprise. The Métis People as 'dupes' of the NWC appears to be a more acceptable rendition of the events of 1816-1821 than an honest account of a developing Métis nationalism created from the subjective reality of Métis existence. Such ethnocentric interpretations of history are common when describing events on the periphery of the British Empire and, in this instance, the Métis were no exception. The fact remains that Métis nationalism had more to do with the dynamics of Métis cultural, economic and political evolution than it ever had to do with the war plans of a few NWC bourgeois.

¹ Adapted from Fred Shore, "The Emergence of the Métis Nation in Manitoba," in L.J. Barkwell, L. Dorion, and D.R. Préfontaine, Editors, *Métis Legacy: A Métis Historiographical and Annotated Bibliography*, Pemmican Publications, 2001.

The Métis: The Golden Years 1821-1870

Once focused in the Red River Settlement Belt, the Métis expanded their trading opportunities with St. Paul, Minnesota. The increased local market for household goods and the beginnings of a grain market around the Forks, combined with contract work freighting trade goods for themselves or for the HBC, provided sufficient opportunities for an expanding Métis middle class. Conflict with the presumed imperial force in Rupert's Land, the HBC, did not take long to develop.

Essentially, the HBC had assumed that their victory over the NWC in 1821 guaranteed them a monopoly of trade in Rupert's Land. The Métis, who had been the major force in the NWC's operations, did not see the process of amalgamation in this light. They continued with what they were used to doing, trading, but with the added development that they were now doing it for themselves and not for some unknown and distant bourgeois. The results were declining profits for the HBC and increasing prosperity for the Métis. Inevitably, the developing Nation and the HBC came into renewed conflict.

In 1849, the Sayer Trial resulted in a guilty verdict for Guillaume Sayer and several others after they were charged by the HBC with trading for furs without a HBC license. Unfortunately, Métis numbers and their unwillingness to accept HBC leadership in economic matters prevented the charge from being translated into an effective form of punishment by a HBC Court. Unable to make their monopoly function in the face of Métis recalcitrance, the HBC then determined to sell Rupert's Land and to accept the challenge of trading for furs without the encumbrance of governing the rapidly changing Northwest. This decision was to have far-reaching effects in that it would involve the Métis

leadership classes and the Canadian government in a disagreement over what form Canadian expansion into Rupert's Land would ultimately take.

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