

Pamphlet # 8

The Métis: Political Maturity and Dispossession

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Political Maturity, 1864-1870

Determined to dispose of what was, by the late 1850s, an economic burden and a political time bomb, the Hudson's Bay Company cooperated with the various scientific expeditions which were sent out by Canada and the United Kingdom in 1857 and 1858. The reports of the Hind and Palliser Expeditions in 1859 demonstrated that the Northwest, up to then a jealously guarded fur land, was, in fact, a potential 'Eden' ripe for occupation by an industrially and agriculturally inclined Upper Canada. By 1860, the HBC was involved in negotiations with the United Kingdom and Upper Canada over the possible sale of Rupert's Land. However, very few people, then or later, took into account the Métis presence in Red River or their ability to prevent change in the structures of power in the area. Given that the negotiations were taking place elsewhere and that they were not stirring up much in the way of public debate anywhere, it is difficult to understand how the Métis came to be so politically active just prior to the finalization of the sale in 1869. The answer appears to lie in the interaction between Canadian excesses in Red River prior to 1869 and a well-honed Métis nationalism.

Once the reports of the scientific expeditions became public knowledge in Upper Canada, a small number of Canadian settlers took up residence in and around Red River. Most of

them were interested in farmland around Poplar Point, High Bluff and Portage la Prairie. The rest of the 'Canadian Party', as the Canadians in Red River before 1870 came to be known, established the 'Town of Winnipeg' where they eventually set up a "shantytown of expectant capitalism" Never numbering more than three hundred and fifty souls prior to 1868, Canadian Party members acted in such an ethnocentric manner over the ten years from 1859 to 1869, that they successfully made the Métis extremely wary of Canadian intentions. Once the news arrived in Red River, late in 1869, that the intended Canadian Lieutenant-Governor, William McDougall, was approaching with enough Canadian militia weapons to arm the Canadian Party, the Métis reacted and took up arms to protect themselves.

Beginning with the capture of Fort Garry in November of 1869 and culminating in the ratification of the *Manitoba Act* less than a year later in July of 1870, the Métis successfully forced Canada to accept Western terms for the Confederation of Rupert's Land as the Province of Manitoba. In the process, the Métis won for themselves statutory protection for their language, religion and laws. They also preserved their land holdings (Section 32, *Manitoba Act*) and gained for themselves and their children additional lands under Section 31 of the same Act. Nevertheless, by 1872 they had lost or were losing most of the lands that they had owned prior to Confederation and they were also being denied the 1,400,000 acres promised in Section 31.

From 1868 to 1870, the Americans in Minnesota had their eyes on Rupert's Land and passed a resolution in their legislature urging the President of the USA to intervene with Great Britain to stop the transfer of land to Canada. They also offered great inducements to Riel to side with them. As Archbishop Taché reported in a July 23, 1870 letter to the Governor-General of Canada: "The Provisional Government of Red

River repudiated offers that might have seduced its members, had not the sentiment of allegiance prevailed; sums of money amounting to more than four millions of dollars (\$4,000,000), men and arms had been offered, and the whole was refused by the 'rebels'." Again, in October 1871, Riel would marshal the Métis leadership to thwart a planned invasion of Manitoba from Minnesota. This prompted Lieutenant-Governor Archibald to state that, "If the half-breeds had taken a different course, I do not believe the Province would now be in our possession.

Dispossession, 1870-1878

It has often been said that the Métis were too 'primitive' a People to comprehend the complexities of a modern democracy and so were doomed to lose out in competition with the more advanced and 'civilized' Canadians. Others have said that even when their religious leaders tried to lead them in the direction of settled farming communities, their primitive inclinations for the hunt prevented them from hearing their voices. The fact is that in 1871 the English and French parishes of Red River had petitioned the Lieutenant-Governor for a rapid allocation of the Métis land grants and for permission to take possession of the hay fields on the outer two miles behind the river lots. Métis provincial legislators petitioned again in 1873. This resulted in the Half-Breed Land Protection Act to prevent the sale of Métis lands to speculators. However, by that time rampant violence against the Métis was the method being used to prevent the uptake of their lands.

More recently, others like Thomas Flanagan, have added to the long list of varying interpretations by insisting that Canada did her best for the 'backward' Métis but that, in the long term, they were too ready to sell their land and too interested in the hunt to remain around a developing Red River. The truth is that the Métis, who were quite prepared to be active

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

partners in Confederation, were violently prevented by certain Canadians in the 'Town of Winnipeg' from accessing the new institutions of power after 1870. They were also prevented from finalizing their Section 31 and 32 land claims by the direct and illegal intervention of the Canadian Government.

The Métis, outnumbered and rapidly becoming impoverished, disappeared after 1878 for all intents and purposes as a viable political force in the West. In 1870, fifty percent of the members of the Legislative Assembly were Métis and sixty-seven percent of members had resided in Manitoba before 1860. However, by 1879 only twenty percent of the members of the assembly had resided in Manitoba before 1860 and only four out of twenty-four members were Métis.

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