

Pamphlet # 10

The Métis: Removal, Resistance and Dispersal Fred J. Shore¹

Political Removal – 1870-1878

Métis assumptions that they had a viable role to play in Red River after Confederation were quickly disabused. The violence, which the authorities seemed unwilling to halt, made any attempt by Métis individuals to participate in the social, economic or political life of the new Province extremely dangerous. Métis inability to protect their hard-won statutory rights in the face of flagrant illegal acts by the lawful authority in the land was also reflected in their inability to maintain a practical political presence in Provincial affairs. Rapidly outnumbered by the waves of new settlers, denied a role in the democratic process and rapidly stripped of their land base, the Métis fled what was no longer their homeland. By 1878 when the last of the Métis members of the Legislative Assembly left office, the Nation was in retreat. Their social customs were not being reflected in the institutions of the Province despite the statutory guarantees of the *Manitoba Act*. Their lands were being lost despite their attempts to find justice in a corrupt legal system. The quagmire of fraud that was the Dominion Lands Office was guaranteeing anyone, except the Métis, land in Western Canada. Abused, dispossessed and outnumbered, the frustrated, angry and disheartened Métis dispersed to the far corners of their former homeland. In their eyes, Canada had broken what one of their leaders had called the Métis' Treaty.

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.

Resistance and Dispersal, 1870-1885

Given the strong Métis role in Red River prior to 1870, their lack of decisive and immediate action after Confederation is surprising. However, the reason for their reluctance to take drastic action to protect themselves lies in their culture and its method of dealing with authority. Normally, the Métis would meet and decide what they wanted to do as a group and then they would appoint leaders to carry out their decisions. These leaders had to return to the community if circumstances changed or if a decision was required that had not been previously discussed and agreed to by the whole community. Once decided upon, the rules were enforced until they were no longer needed, at which time the leaders and the rules were put aside until they were needed again. After 1870, the Métis were waiting for the elected authorities to carry out the new rules, actually the List of Rights everyone had agreed upon. By the time they realized that the authorities were not going to uphold the rules, it was too late and they were outnumbered, outmaneuvered and well on the way to being forcibly and illegally dispossessed. So accustomed were they to their method of governance that some of their leaders even held back some of their younger men who wished to use violence to protect Métis rights and persons. Given the overpowering forces arrayed against them by 1880, many of the Settlement Belt Métis had moved away from the troubles and were re-establishing themselves elsewhere.

When a small group of Métis tried to use more forceful means to reassert their rights in the area around Batoche on the South Saskatchewan River in 1885, the Canadian Militia was once again called into action. The astute and pragmatic John A. Macdonald took advantage of Métis discontent to settle his problems with the Cree and the homesteaders in the Saskatchewan Territory. By the end of November 1885, the Métis had lost their

greatest leader at the end of a Canadian rope, Big Bear and Poundmaker were in jail and the Cree were learning to live on short rations under the watchful attention of Dominion Indian Agents. The settlers, for their part, had had some of their land problems solved, but the sense of alienation that the West still holds with regards to the East became an ingrained part of Western agricultural life. Canada, for her part, had what she wanted: uninterrupted room to carry out the 'Purposes of the Dominion' and to complete the Canadian Pacific Railway.

After 1885, the Métis found themselves branded as rebels and traitors and relegated to the 'road allowances' of the Northwest. It is at this point that they came to realize that their ability to function as a Nation had been inoperative for some time. Like the process of nation-building, very few Métis were ever aware that they had ceased to be active at the national level and that their major concern had instead become survival as individual families on the periphery of Canada's new colony. Most importantly, the People no longer controlled even their own membership.

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