

Nimoo Waanihkew  
Unforgotten

Prior to 2017, despite being a recognized people and haven been given “distinct names by Indigenous nations and by the European fur traders, such as Otipemisiwak, Apeetogosan, gens libres and Bois-brûlés,”<sup>1</sup> the Métis were not a recognized people nationally according to the government of Canada and hence had been deemed the “forgotten people.” In past generations Métis identity has been based on vastly different social, cultural, political, and historical categories of belonging, yet, over the last decades the Métis have been reclaiming and re-examining their identity. The result of reclaiming and re-examining Métis identity has led to great confusion and disagreement about what it means to be “Métis” in contemporary Canada. Various interpretations and vague descriptions as well as conflicting understandings of what it is to be Métis by various governments and Indigenous bodies, as well as settler societies, has led to the appropriation of Métis identity, land, rights and culture, prompting tensions between Métis, First Nation, and Euro-Canadians. The Métis have an adaptive nature, their adaptability is shown through their culture, language, political structures and stances, their ways of life, as well as through rising above appropriation, attempts of assimilation and other struggles that they have faced. In spite of their struggles, the Métis have been able to rise above the confines placed upon them by preserving and sharing their language, communities and territories, kin networks, traditions and cultural vitality.

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<sup>1</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada* (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018)

Born from the fur trade, the Métis were known as either “mixed-blood” or “half-breed.” They are the result of relationships between white fur trade men, of either English, French, Irish or Scottish descent and Indigenous women from either Assiniboine, Cree, Iroquois, or Ojibwas groups.<sup>2</sup> Intermingling and intermarriage created a unique ethnicity and identity, kinship networks, communities, and a culture distinct from Indigenous and Euro-Canadian cultures. The Métis established extensive communities in Western Canada such as Winnipeg, Batoche and Prince Albert in Saskatchewan and Edmonton, northwestern Ontario, Northwest Territories, Montana and North Dakota.<sup>3</sup> The Métis belonged to either French or English groups. The French Métis develop the Michif language by combining both French and Cree languages almost equally. The English Métis developed the Bungi language, combining Cree and Orkneys, a Scottish dialect.<sup>4</sup>

Along with developing their own language, the Métis fused two non-interacting cultures developing unique traditional dances, music, traditional medicines which includes “traditional Indigenous plants and remedies, although a few medicines have been handed down from the Métis’ Euro-Settler ancestors,”<sup>5</sup> oral traditions such as storytelling, innovations such as the Red River cart, the capote, gauntlets, and art such as embroidery and beadwork that combines both First Nations beadwork with floral embroidery introduced by French-Canadian nuns during Roman Catholic missions.<sup>6</sup> Through material culture such as the Métis sash, “a symbol of

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<sup>2</sup> Adams, Christopher, Dahl, Gregg, and Peach, Ian, eds. 2013. *Metis in Canada : History, Identity, Law and Politics*. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press. Accessed March 28, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>3</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada* (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018)

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, *Canada: a National History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, Ont: Pearson Longman, 2007), 139.

<sup>5</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada* (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018), 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada* (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018), 52.

identity and achievement,”<sup>7</sup> beadwork, Métis music and dance to name a few, it becomes apparent that Métis identity is fluid and diversifies with employment, kin networks, and trade relations.<sup>8</sup>

Having always viewed themselves as a distinct people with their own inherent rights, the Métis have tried to preserve their independence, culture and way of life. The preservation of their people was done by resisting changes and repressions placed upon them by Euro-Canadians such as the Red River Resistance and the Northwest Resistance of 1885 including the Battle of Duck Lake, the Battle of Fish Creek and the Battle of Batoche. Throughout the development of Canada, both pre and post confederation, First Nations and Métis cultures have been repressed and their culture, lively hood, and rights deliberately interfered with. It took effort to attempt erase language, kinship ties, territorial relationships, traditions and indigeneity all while attempting to enforce Euro-Canadian language, customs, and beliefs. These efforts to erase, oppress, and deny the Métis contributed in the generation of the “Big M, Little m,” concept; "written with a small 'm,' métis is a racial term for anyone of mixed Indian and European ancestry. Written with a capital 'M,' Métis is a socio-cultural or political term for those originally of mixed ancestry who evolved into a distinct indigenous people during a certain historical period in a certain region of Canada,"<sup>9</sup> a controversial topic to say the least. The “Big ‘M’, Little ‘m’” concept creates many problems not only culturally and politically but becomes an issue of

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<sup>7</sup> Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to Frist Nations, Métis, & Inuit Issues in Canada*, (Winnipeg: Highwater Press, 2016), 84.

<sup>8</sup> Adams, Christopher, Dahl, Gregg, and Peach, Ian, eds. 2013. *Metis in Canada : History, Identity, Law and Politics*. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press. Accessed March 28, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>9</sup> Heather Devine, *People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family, 1660-1900*, (Calgary, Alta.: University of Calgary Press, 2004), xvii-xviii.

human rights; “to attempt a dual usage (Métis/métis) would be to take it upon ourselves to decide who belongs to socio-political categories that are still subject to redefinition and evolution.”<sup>10</sup>

Oppression through forceful assimilation, discrimination based on maternal lines and not paternal lines like that in First Nations, and the denial of Métis people and culture through renouncement of Indigenous heritage, to name a few, led to the attempt to eradicate the Métis through the decimation of bison, the appropriation of land and the relocation of Métis groups in the west. In using force to claim the west, Ottawa began the buffalo slaughter, clearing land for migrant farming, all while removing a major food and economic source for the Métis. Bison hides were used by the Métis “to make clothing such as hats, coats, blankets, leggings and gloves. They also used the meat to feed themselves and to trade,”<sup>11</sup> and bison bones were used for weapons and tools. By the 1880’s the Métis were reduced to poverty “and found themselves in a much worse socio-economic situation than their cousins in the wooded areas of the plains.”<sup>12</sup>

Scrip, now obsolete and unknown to the majority of Canadians today is still a fluent word in Métis households. Used as a way to appropriate land and described by the Métis as a pacifier and erasers, scrip was used by the government to appease the Métis and abolish their claims to Indigenous title, also known as Indigenous land rights.<sup>13</sup> The system of Métis scrip was implemented after the Red River Resistance of 1868-1870. Post Red River Resistance, the Canadian government formed the province of Manitoba under the Manitoba act, an act that set

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<sup>10</sup> Heather Devine, *People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family, 1660-1900*, (Calgary, Alta.: University of Calgary Press, 2004), xvii.

<sup>11</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada*, (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018),

<sup>12</sup> Patrick Douaud, *The Western Métis: Profile of People* (Regina, Saskatchewan: Canadian Plains Research Center, 2007), 71.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Teillet, *The North-West is our mother: the story of Louis Riel's people, the Métis Nation*, (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Patrick Crean Editions, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2019), 381.

aside 1.4 million acres of land for the Métis. As land grants became exhausted, scrip was distributed to supplement the land grants. Unlike land grants, scrip was distributed individually rather than to a collective, this can be viewed as an attempt to disband and abolish Métis groups. Scrip was a coupon given to the Métis redeemable for either land or money, “an ineffectual attempt to extinguish the land rights of Métis.”<sup>14</sup> Scrip was valued at either 160 acres of land or \$160, overtime, the value of scrip increased to 240 acres or \$240. Scrip was not a fair process, many Métis were either impersonated or misled into giving up their scrip, some simply did not understand the process, commissions were ignored and scrip was purchased for cheap rates by speculators, of the 14,849 scrips issued, speculators acquired 12,560.<sup>15</sup> Some Métis could join bands with the permission of the chief, if closely connected with a First Nations band, and so, some members of the same family would take scrip and others would take treaty and become “Indians”.<sup>16</sup> “Non-status Indians are those who are not considered Indians under the Indian Act but are still obviously Aboriginal people. The Métis are another group of Aboriginal peoples. For years and years and years, both groups have been tossed back and forth like a hot potato between the provinces and the federal government saying, “They’re your problem, not ours!” This has left non-status Indians and Métis in a sort of limbo.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada* (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018)

<sup>15</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada* (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018) (INDIGENOUS CANADA) p. 93

<sup>16</sup> Jean Teillet, *The North-West is our mother: the story of Louis Riel's people, the Métis Nation*, (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Patrick Crean Editions, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2019), 383.

<sup>17</sup> Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis, & Inuit Issues in Canada*, (Winnipeg: Highwater Press, 2016), 49.

The Métis followed the “reproductive and ripening flora and fauna cycles, which meant adapting their lives to the changing seasons.”<sup>18</sup> The Métis were accustomed to moving with the changing seasons, the Métis are adaptable but with no land to turn to, many Métis turned to parks, forested land, and Crown land intended for road use, forming makeshift communities and so “the Métis had began to be called the “road allowance people.”<sup>19</sup> Their homes reflected their poverty yet also their adaptability. The Métis built homes from discarded lumber and logs as well as other recycled materials.<sup>20</sup> The process of either taking scrip, not taking scrip, or taking treaty did not create a divide between Métis and First Nations, nor did it dismantle Métis as a people or their identity.

The recognition of Métis occurred officially in section 35(2) of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, although the term Métis predates the official recognition of 1982. “Métis identity has evolved in more recent times. In the 1960’s, the old names used by various historical Métis communities to describe themselves (such as Half-breeds or “Michifs”) gave way to the “Métis” and the creation of pan- Métis identity. Around the same time, there was a recognition that both non-status Indians and Métis has a great deal in common as unrecognized Indigenous peoples. As a result, non-status Indians and Métis shared common political lobbying organizations through the 1970’s and early 1980’s.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada*, (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018), 18.

<sup>19</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada* (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018), 40.

<sup>19</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada* (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018), 40.

<sup>20</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada* (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018), 40.

<sup>21</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada* (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018)

The Métis voice has only gotten stronger over the last decades. As one of the first voices of Métis Nation in constitutional debates Harry Daniels, a political science major from the University of Saskatchewan, was a political advocate for the Métis throughout the 60's until his death in 2004. Daniels was the executive director of the Saskatchewan Métis Society and in 1971 was elected vice president of the Métis Association of Alberta. By the mid 70's Daniels made a transition from provincial to federal politics.<sup>22</sup> Harry Daniels looked to “revolutionary ideas and zeal of the American civil rights movement, the Black Panthers, and the American Indian Movement, Frantz Fanon’s writings from Africa, and the human rights revolution,”<sup>23</sup> and with Pierre Elliot Trudeau’s wish to patriate the constitution, Daniels attacked the idea that the French and English founded the nation. Daniels believed that constitutional debates would allow for the Métis to gain recognition and that the Métis Nation would be seen with “distinct status within the Confederation.”<sup>24</sup> By 1981, Trudeau was forced to abolish his plan for patriation, but Daniels continued his fight for Métis recognition. It was not until after his death that the Federal Court “granted the declaration that Métis and non-Status Indians are Indians under the constitution.”<sup>25</sup> It is imperative to understand that “the decision of *Daniels v. Canada* does not mean that Métis and Non-Status Indians are ruled under the *Indian Act*, it does not grant Indian Status to Métis people, and it does not mean that Métis people can live on reserves.”<sup>26</sup> Although this may be

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<sup>22</sup> “Harry Daniels,” Harry Daniels | The Canadian Encyclopedia, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/harry-daniels>.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Teillet, *The North-West is our mother: the story of Louis Riel's people, the Métis Nation*, (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Patrick Crean Editions, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2019), 439.

<sup>24</sup> Jean Teillet, *The North-West is our mother: the story of Louis Riel's people, the Métis Nation*, (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Patrick Crean Editions, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers Ltd, 2019), 439.

<sup>25</sup> “Harry Daniels,” Harry Daniels | The Canadian Encyclopedia, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/harry-daniels>.

<sup>26</sup> “Harry Daniels,” Harry Daniels | The Canadian Encyclopedia, accessed April 6, 2020, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/harry-daniels>.

viewed as a loss, it has “enhanced Métis rights” and has provided the Métis with educations, cultural, and training funding from the federal government.<sup>27</sup>

In 1993 Steve Powley had killed a moose outside of Sault Ste Marie, Ontario. Tagging the moose with a Métis card that read “harvesting my meat for the winter”, Powley was charged by conservation officers for hunting without a license, as well as possession of moose contrary to Ontario’s Game and Fish Act. Powley fought and had the Supreme Court of Canada include the Métis as “Aboriginal people of Canada” in s.35 of the Constitution Act, 1982, recognizing and valuing Métis culture and ways of life, all while protecting Métis harvesting rights.<sup>28</sup>

These are only two of many voices that support and fight for Métis rights and recognition. The Saskatchewan Métis Association, in 1975, “changed its name to the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan to reflect the inclusion of non-status Indians with the movement. Non-status Indians also filled the ranks of Métis organizations in Alberta and Manitoba, as the Métis and non-status Indians had a common cause since their rights as Indigenous peoples were also ignored by government. The Métis political movements at this time focused on Métis housing, employment, education, and education training.”<sup>29</sup> Many other association that represent the Métis and give them a strong voice can be found across Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Alberta and Ontario. In 2016, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the Métis are in fact “Indians” and hence the responsibility of the federal government, and in

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<sup>27</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada = Atlas des peuples autochtones du Canada*, (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018), 65.

<sup>28</sup> “The Powley Story,” accessed April 6, 2020, <http://www.metisnation.org/rights/the-powley-story/>.

<sup>29</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada = Atlas des peuples autochtones du Canada*, (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018),

2017, the implementation of the Canada-Métis Nation Accord took place, an outline that will ensure that the concerns of the Métis are dealt with honourably.<sup>30</sup>

Although the fight for Métis rights and freedoms have been a struggle, progress has been made and will continue to be made. Métis languages and heritage are endangered but not lost. The Louis Riel Institute, founded to “deal with education concerns and aspirations of the Métis people of Manitoba,”<sup>31</sup> offers programs based on Métis culture and Michif language programs. The Gabriel Dumon Institue mission statement is “to promote the renewal and development of Métis culture through research, materials development, collection and distribution of those materials and the design, development and delivery of Métis-specific educational programs and services.”<sup>32</sup> With the help of Métis political advocates, elders, artists, and efforts made by the Gabriel Dumont Institute and the Louis Riel Institute, the preservation and promotion of this culture will be a success.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada = Atlas des peuples autochtones du Canada*, (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018), 65.

<sup>31</sup> Welcome to Louis Riel Institute, accessed April 7, 2020, <http://www.louisrielinstitute.com/index.php>.

<sup>32</sup> Gabriel Dumont Institute, “Mission and Values,” Mission and Values | Gabriel Dumont Institute, accessed April 7, 2020, <https://gdins.org/about/overview/mission-statement/>.

<sup>33</sup> *Indigenous peoples atlas of Canada = Atlas des peuples autochtones du Canada*, (Ottawa, Ont: Royal Canadian Geographical Society National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation Assembly of First Nations Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami Métis National Council Indspire, 2018), 65.

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