



The Métis

The Métis are the product of French, English and Scottish fur traders having relationships with Aboriginal women that produced offspring throughout Acadia, New France and Rupert's Land. Taking their name from a French word that means "mixed," these peoples have found themselves in a precarious position throughout Canadian history. While they are from Aboriginal and European bloodlines, they've often been disowned or discredited by either side. Thus, many of these people have felt caught in the middle, as though they have no identity or ethnic group they can associate with.

These peoples have been at the forefront of a number of violent clashes in Canadian history involving land rights, including the Seven Oaks Incident, The Red River Rebellion and The Northwest Rebellion. While the Métis were the subject of fraud during the late nineteenth century involving scrip offered by the federal government, political activists were successful during the Great Depression in regaining land and control of that land back from the province of Alberta.

The Atlantic Métis

During the 1600s, many French European men married Aboriginal women within Acadia and New France, particularly among those belonging to the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet bands. At first, the Catholic Church sanctioned these marriages for there were very few French women living in the New World at the time.

However, as time progressed, there were concerns raised by the church and state about French men adopting "savage" Aboriginal ways of life and, more importantly, the rampant sexual appetite of Coureurs de bois involved in Aboriginal trading activities responsible for producing a plethora of new "mixed" offspring.

As a result of the growing sexual imbalances in the French population in New France, France started shifting towards a policy of populating New France with Filles du Roi by the 1660s. These were single women from France whose sole purpose was to settle with males in New France and start large new families that were purely French.

However, this didn't fully stop French males from having relationships with Aboriginal women. In fact, after 1690, many French-Aboriginal couples and their offspring would settle around the Great Lakes and beyond. They did so hoping to work mainly as fur traders and live outside of mainstream society and its dictates.

The Western Métis

The *Treaty of Utrecht, 1713*, put Rupert's Land under the control of the Hudson's Bay Company. The Company began setting up permanent trading colonies among Cree Aboriginals.

While the Company strictly prohibited relationships with Aboriginal women, white women were completely absent in this region. Many Scottish and English fur traders who were in these regions began to be introduced into Aboriginal customs by their Cree "homeguards".

Eventually, the inevitable began to happen. By the 1740s, the Company had to admit that it had no control over its men as the number of offspring as a result of British and Aboriginal sexual relationships were becoming quite numerous.

However, company officials also realized there was a hidden benefit with this new mixed race that they could use to their advantage. These managers realized they could train the children in fur trading, and mold them into future workers of the Company.

Eventually, though, these Métis found themselves aligning with French mixed bloods in the Great Lakes region after the Conquest of 1760 and then again with the Jay Treaty of 1794, which fixed the boundary of British North America and the United States. The Métis started to feel like a separate entity from the conquering British interests, especially considering their original heritage technically began with the French.

Also, these Métis were starting to become displaced by the growing number of English settlements in the region, which culminated with the Selkirk Settlement. This was another source of their discontent.

In the end, many of these western Métis started to join up with rival fur traders from Montréal: the North West Company. This led to bloody consequences.

The Selkirk Indenture, 1811

In 1811, British aristocrat Thomas Selkirk wished to create a new colony in a region owned by the Hudson's Bay Company. Selkirk purchased some 300,000 square kilometers of land mostly located in what is now lower Manitoba and upper Minnesota from the fur trading company.

Selkirk called this region Assiniboia. This led to the creation of the Red River Settlement or Selkirk Settlement in 1812. It was mainly home to Scottish and Irish settlers, as well as three Swedes. It would also eventually become home to Swiss mercenaries who fought in the War of 1812.

The colony only lasted for three years, however. The Métis and Scottish fur traders who had originally called the area home were angered that they were not consulted about this community. They felt these new settlers - who practiced agriculture - would get in the way of their hunting lifestyle and food supplies.

The fur traders and Métis wound up being right. The settlers had great difficulty trying to survive as farmers, and often had to turn to the fur traders for help. Miles Macdonell, the governor of Assiniboia, issued the *Pemmican Proclamation* in January 1814, which

prohibited the export of food provisions from the region in order to help the settlers and their families stay fed.

This proclamation angered fur traders employed by the Montréal-based North West Company, who feared it would interrupt their trading network.

In early 1815, these fur traders burned the colony, arrested Macdonell and forced the remaining settlers - those who still hadn't left after being offered better land elsewhere by the North West Company, at least - to flee back to Upper Canada.

Did You Know ... ?

The Red River Colony was host to a couple of Canada's greatest explorers and surveyors. For instance, Peter Fidler would survey lots for settlement in 1811. Simon Fraser also even tried to retire to the colony in 1815 to take up life as a fur trader. Fraser, however, got caught up in the aftermath of the Seven Oaks Incident in 1816, and was charged for not helping Selkirk in his fight against the North West Company. Fraser was acquitted of these charges in 1818.

Excerpt of the *Pemmican Proclamation, 1814*

(URL: <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/30050/0267>)

Indenture of sale from the Hudson's Bay Company to the Earl of Selkirk, 1811

(URL: <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/30387/0302>)

The Hudson's Bay Company's Land Tenures and the Occupation of Assiniboia by Lord Selkirk's Settlers with a List of Grantees under the Earl and Company

(URL: <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/30386/0005>)

The Seven Oaks Incident, 1816

After the Red River Colony was destroyed in 1815, there were attempts to resettle the land under a new administrator, Robert Semple. However, such attempts would be doomed to failure.

On June 19, 1816, a group of Métis led by Cuthbert Grant killed Semple and 20 of his men when both parties intercepted each other accidentally during the Seven Oaks Incident. This was a massacre that was the result of an intense rivalry between the British-owned Hudson's Bay Company and French North West Company.

Some of the circumstances leading to this event included:

- the Hudson's Bay Company's capturing of Fort Gibraltar from the North West Company in early 1816;
- the North West Company's capturing of Brandon House on June 1, 1816.

Two months after the Seven Oaks Incident, Thomas Selkirk and a mercenary force attacked and captured Fort William, the Métis primary base of operations. Selkirk's forces also took Fort Douglas.

The massacre is notable in that it forced the two rival fur-trading companies to reconsider their hostility and competition with each other.

In 1821, after Selkirk's death, both companies finally decided to merge. The Hudson's Bay Company absorbed the North West Company, putting an end to bloodshed in the region.

The Hudson's Bay Company, including an account of the North West Company and French traders (a history book from 1900)

(URL: <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/30050>)

Papers relating to the Red River Settlement, 1819

(URL: <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/ItemRecord/18595>)

The Selkirk Treaty, 1817

In 1817, Selkirk decided to sign a treaty with the Cree and Chippewa nations, among others, to extinguish their claims to a tract of land on his domain stretching along the Red River. He distributed this land to new settlers.

When Selkirk died in 1820, the executors of his estate sought to control spiraling costs by ending new European settlement on the land. Only those who had settled during the late 1810s, plus some retired Métis fur traders, remained on the land.

In 1836, land covered by this treaty reverted back to the Hudson's Bay Company.

Did you know ... ?

In September 1855, the last remaining piece of wild land that the government didn't own was sold to a settler in Canada West (formerly Upper Canada). This led some political leaders like George Brown to push for western expansion. This also led to "scientific expeditions" to the West under the likes of Hind and Palliser by 1857 to see how well-suited the Prairies really were to mass settlement.

The Selkirk Treaty, 1817

(URL: <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/30387/0301>)

Papers relating to the Red River Settlement, 1819

(URL: <http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/18595/0003>)

The Red River Rebellion, 1869 - 1870

The land owned by the Hudson's Bay Company was set to change hands once again in 1869 and became the property of the new Dominion of Canada. This angered many Métis and Aboriginals, who felt that new European settlers coming into the region were

violating their land rights and disrupting their way of life. This was a leading cause of the Red River Rebellion in 1869-70.

In the middle of the year 1870, the land was finally handed back to the federal government. However, a new province, Manitoba, was created in part to appease the French-speaking Métis living in the region.

Did You Know ... ?

In the 1870s, there was a sizable Icelandic community living in the Lake Winnipeg area that even had its own form of self-government. (There were roughly 10,000 people of this heritage in what would become part of Manitoba by some estimates.) However, when the borders of Manitoba were expanded in the 1880s, this community chose to become absorbed into the province.

Rupert's Land Act, 1868

(URL: http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9_03428/0668)

Correspondence Regarding Disturbances at Red River, 1869 - 70

(URL: http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9_03764/0004)

Métis Scrip

Under the *Manitoba Act, 1870*, Métis families were promised by the federal government that land would be specifically put aside for them. In exchange, they had to give up their attachment to Aboriginal customs and ways of life.

To administer the land grants, the government introduced a system called *scrip*. This was a special certificate or warrant issued by the Department of the Interior. This certificate gave the bearer the right homestead land when the document was presented to the proper authorities at a Dominion Lands Office at a later date.

The scrip looked like a bank note and was issued in monetary or land denominations ranging from \$20 to \$240 or up to 240 acres. (Under the *Dominion Lands Act, 1872*, the government set the value of land at \$1 per acre.) Thus, the bearer of monetary scrip would ideally be allowed to purchase an acre for each dollar the government had provided him or her.

However, some Métis allowed their monetary scrip to be sold to land speculators for at much less than face value to help settle their debts and purchase supplies. In fact, the system was set up in such a way that all sorts of fraud and abuses could occur.

Because scrip was simply made out "To The Bearer," this meant that *anyone* could use it - Métis and non-Métis alike. Scrip that fell out of Métis hands was called "black market scrip."

Some Métis would go to a government office to cash their scrip for land, only to find out that someone else had already claimed land with scrip on their behalf. The Department of the Interior frequently lost track of scrip claims, and many Métis went without land.

It has been argued by historians that the government deliberately set up such a faulty system on purpose. This might have been to ensure that it didn't have to give land to the Métis or "half-breeds," thus allowing settlers of purer European stock to move into and claim all of the land.

Dominion Lands Act, 1872

(URL: http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9_08050_5/0181)

Acte concernant les terres publiques de la Puissance, 1872

(URL: http://www.canadiana.org/ECO/PageView/9_01839_5/0183)

The Famous Five

In the 1930s, a great deal of political activism took place in Métis communities in Alberta and Saskatchewan over land rights. The following five men, sometimes dubbed The Famous Five, were particularly instrumental in convincing the Alberta government to hold the Ewing Commission in 1934 to look into Métis land claims:

- James Patrick Brady
- Malcolm Norris
- Peter Tomkins Jr.
- Joe Dion
- Felix Callihoo

In 1938, the Alberta government passed the *Métis Betterment Act* to provide financial resources and land to the Métis on the recommendation of the commission. (However, the provincial government would later rescind some of this land in certain communities.) Revisions in 1955 and 1970 provided the basis for increased self-government in key Métis settlements.

The Alberta Federation of Métis Settlement Associations was officially established in 1975 to act as the political voices for these communities.

In 1990, land titles passed from the Alberta government to these Métis communities through the new *Métis Settlement Act*, which replaced the *Métis Betterment Act*.

Confederation Act, 1982

Section 25 of the modern charter of rights and freedoms guaranteed the rights and freedoms of **all** Aboriginals, Métis and Inuit. The basis for these rights and freedoms are:

- The *Royal Proclamation of 1763*;
- Previous land claim agreements made between governments and Aboriginals;
- Other outstanding agreements.

Section 35 recognized and affirmed existing Aboriginal treaty rights. It suggested that these treaties are open to interpretation and further negotiation.

Confederation Act, 1982 (URL: http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/const/annex_e.html)