

"OVERVIEW" OF  
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
THE METIS AND THE INDIANS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>PAGE</u>
I Introduction . . . . .	1
II Early Metis and Indians . . . . .	1
III Some Federal Policies re: The Indians and the Metis . . . . .	2
IV 1885 Rebellion . . . . .	6
V Post 1885 Rebellion . . . . .	7
VI Conclusions . . . . .	9
Footnotes . . . . .	10

## I Introduction

In today's society some Metis identify themselves as Indians but are not legally recognized as such under the Indian Act. Prior to Confederation, there were Indians, Metis (French-Indian) is the way the census recorded them. Thus, Metis are not primarily people who lost their status but are individuals who never gained it. Status Indians is a post-confederation phenomenon. Non-status Indians on the other hand, are those native people who (on their own, or because their parents or grandparents have done so) have relinquished or lost Indian status for some reason: to own land or business off the reserve, or simply through failure to register.

Metis and non-status Indians differ from registered Indians in their access to services since the federal government claims no official responsibility for their well-being in spite of the fact that many treaties included provisions for halfbreed people. The Metis and non-status Indians are dependent for consideration of their special needs on the attitude of the province or territory where they reside.<sup>1</sup>

## II Early Metis and Indians

The relationship between the Metis and the Indians dates back several hundred years. The paternal (or father) ancestors of the Metis were the former employees of the Hudson Bay Company and the North West Fur Companies.<sup>2</sup> The maternal (or mother) ancestors of the Metis were the Indian women of various Indian tribes. The Metis were an intermediate group between the Indians, to whom they were related, and the fur companies, to whom they were economically bound. French and Indian by birth, the Metis evolved as a combination of elements from two distinct parent cultures. From the Indians they inherited a language and the knowledge and skills of hunting, trapping and travel in the plains and forests. From the French they inherited the French language,

the Roman Catholic religion and socio-economic ties to the fur trade.<sup>3</sup>

Louis Riel himself said to consider the conditions of the Metis in 1885, in the North West, and particularly in Saskatchewan, it is necessary to know how they were situated before confederation. He stated the Metis were people who had owned the territory of the North West. The Indian blood in their veins established their right or title to the soil. They had possession of this soil conjointly with the Indians.<sup>4</sup>

The early days of the Metis and the Indians are similar in nature. They both lived the free spirited life of nomads on the prairies. Their main source of food was by the hunt, as well as trapping and fishing. As time passed, and the fur trade companies moved west, there became more "inter-marrying" of white traders to women of Indian descent.

In the very early days of the North West, there was never any question of who owned the land for it was the inhabitants' (first the Indians, then the halfbreeds) feeling that the land was shared. The question arose, however, when Lord Selkirk found it necessary or advisable to negotiate a treaty with the Indians of the Red River district. Thus in 1817, the Indians surrendered their land for "100 pounds of good merchantable tobacco" to each nation annually. It was thought by Selkirk that it was easier to buy the Indians off rather than using more forceful means.<sup>5</sup>

### III Some Federal Policies Re: The Indians and the Metis

One of the first recognitions of Indian title came in The British North America Act of 1867, when the Dominion of Canada requested the admission of the North West Territories. Specific provisions were made for the compensation of lands taken from the Indians. Thus, when the Hudson Bay Company transferred the land to the Canadian Government, they were "passing the buck" to the government to deal with any Indian claims. Because the

Metis and Indian people were considered different by the government, there were several different means of dealing with them.

Most of the federal governments' attempts at dealing with the Indians were very deliberate. When the government negotiated with the Indians, they said they were trying to assimilate the Indian people. The government viewed the Indians as a people who were completely incapable of managing their own affairs and had to be watched over as little children.<sup>6</sup>

In dealing with the Indians, the federal government entered into several treaties.<sup>7</sup> The man responsible for most of the treaties on the prairies was Governor Morris. He certainly recognized the significance of the relationship between the Indians and the Metis. He commented on the value the Metis played in negotiating the treaties:

They have been the ambassadors between the east and the west; the interpreters of civilization and its exigencies to the dwellers on the prairie as well as the exponents to the white men of the consideration justly due to the susceptibilities, the sensitive self-respect, the prejudices, of the Indian race. In fact they have done for the colony what otherwise would have been left unaccomplished, and have introduced between the white population and the red man a traditional feeling of amity and friendship which but for them it might have been impossible to establish.<sup>8</sup>

Morris went on to say:

... for my own part, I can frankly say, that I always had the confidence, support and active co-operation of the halfbreeds of all origins, in my negotiations with the Indian tribes, and I owe them this full acknowledgement thereof.<sup>9</sup>

It would seem by the above comments, that it could safely be said that without the assistance of the Metis interpreters and negotiators, the treaties with the Indians may not have been entered into. It should also be noted that although Morris recognized the Metis, he consistently agreed he could only deal with the Indians with respect to the treaties.

In dealing with the Metis, the federal government did not look upon them as Indians. Sir J. A. Macdonald in referring to the Manitoba Act, which was a formal acknowledgement of the Metis' rights said: ...

That phrase (the extinguishment of the Indian title) was an incorrect one, because the halfbreeds did not allow themselves to be Indians. If they are Indians, they go with the tribe; if they are halfbreeds they are white, and they stand in exactly the same relation to the Hudson Bay Company and Canada as if they were altogether white.<sup>10</sup>

This last quote is a clear illustration of the federal government's policy regarding the Metis. Either a person is an Indian and has a treaty number or he is a white man.

As time passed both the Indians and Metis became disillusioned with the federal governments repeated promises of a better life and repeated failure to deal equitably with the situation. The government was trying to force the Indians to live on the reserves and try to begin a new way of life through agriculture. However, the Indians were reluctant to do this because word about the government's failure to live up to their promises spread throughout the west. Because of this reluctance, the government instructed that less rations should be given to the Indian people.<sup>11</sup> In addition to little rations, the Indians found that their attempts at agricultural life met with failure. It is not just that the Indians neither knew how to farm, nor had proper tools or equipment to work with, but at this particular time, there was a depression which hit western Canada and caused severe famine and starvation among the Indians.

Also, the government wanted the Indians to move to the North so that they would be away from the American Indians' influence. According to Stanley, all the Indians were moved away from the American frontier. Fort Walsh, in the south was abandoned and by the end of 1883, most Saskatchewan Indians were north of the main line of the railway.<sup>12</sup> The government felt that the Indian problem was solved at that time. Lt. Governor Dewdney

of the North-West Territories said:

Thus may be considered solved one of the greatest problems which has had to be encountered for some years past, and the Indian Department has to congratulate itself on so easy a solution of the difficulty of preventing incursions from our side into the neighbouring territory.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of these assurances, the Indian difficulties were far from being solved in 1883. There were still many Indians who did not wish to settle down on their reserves, who clung to the old ways and were prepared to hold out against the government's proposal as long as possible. One of the leaders of this feeling was the Cree Chief, Big Bear. He had ideas of forming a confederation among the Indians to bring about more solidarity in their negotiations with the government.<sup>14</sup> It is possible that Big Bear got these ideas after meeting Louis Riel in Montana; for it is known that Canadian Indians, including Big Bear, spent some time where Riel was located with a band of halfbreeds between 1879 and 1881.

But even Big Bear could not hold out indefinitely from signing the treaty and in 1883, he agreed to go north and sign the treaty. However, Big Bear learned that there were other Indian Chiefs who were angered with the way the government was treating them. In December, 1883, the government was aware of uneasiness among the Indians and one assistant commissioner wrote:

Big Bear and his followers were loth to settle on a reserve and from what I could gather, and judging from the Indian nature, I am confident these Indians have some project in view as yet undisclosed and it would not surprise me to find that they are making efforts to procure a large gathering from east and west at Battleford or adjacent thereto in the spring, in order to test their powers with the authorities once more.<sup>15</sup>

The Commissioner was right about this, for plans had been made for a large Indian Council in June, 1884. The reason given for this gathering was the meeting was to celebrate the annual

Thirst Dance. The Metis were informed of this and a letter was sent to Louis Riel who was in the United States:

... you have no idea how great your influence is, even amongst the Indians. I know you do not like the men much, but I am certain that it will be the grandest demonstration that has ever taken place ... Now, my dear cousin, the closest union exists between the French and English and the Indians, and we have good generals to foster it.<sup>16</sup>

The Metis and the halfbreeds were as excited as the Indians. They had not forgotten their resistance to the government fifteen years earlier. The government had failed to recognize any of the Metis' rights outside of Manitoba. They felt that if the Metis wanted to be treated like the Indians, then they should live on the reserve and live the life of the Indian. However, if they wanted land, they should be subject to the same rights as any other new settler.<sup>17</sup>

The agitation of the Metis and halfbreeds in the North-West Territories, during the ten years between 1873 and 1883, carried little weight in Ottawa. Ottawa believed that the native population would soon be outnumbered and submerged in the rising population of white settlers. Also, the government knew that the mixed-bloods had no recognized leader and no strategic centre of settlement. The government continued to ignore any attempts made by the Metis or Indians to improve conditions in the west. Several petitions were sent by the Metis seeking recognition of their rights but after Macdonald had been re-elected, he continued to say the Metis were just the same as whites.

#### IV 1885 Rebellion

Following the pleadings of the Metis, Louis Riel returned from the United States to try to settle some of the difficulties the native people faced in the North West. He encouraged the Metis to seek redress by petitions to the government. Nothing happened for the government did not respond. In



the fall of 1884, the Metis drew up a list of rights and sent them to Ottawa with a petition asking for guarantees. Ottawa ignored this as well.

In March of 1884, Riel and his closest followers were aware that they could not defeat Canada in a war. They hoped, however, to force the government into meeting their demands by capturing Fort Carlton and the Mounted Police force, and securing an alliance with the Indians. The encounter with Crozier at Duck Lake turned into an armed battle, but the Indians never did arrive in time to support the Metis. It was Stanley's view, when he stated:

The Metis were in no position to conduct a successful rebellion. At the most Riel could only call upon four or five hundred Metis ... Moreover, they were poorly armed ... supplies, too, were insufficient and ammunition was scarce.<sup>18</sup>

The Canadian government reacted to the Metis rebellion by sending 5,000 soldiers, to combat a maximum of 500 Metis. The federal government used force to put down a rebellion by the Metis who had wanted nothing more than their land and cultural rights guaranteed. The Rebellion ended on May 12, 1885, and with their defeat Canada destroyed the Metis' hopes for economic stability.

#### V        Post 1885 Rebellion

In the years following the Rebellion, the Canadian government rewarded the army, Mounted Police, and militia men for their participation in the Rebellion of 1885. These men were granted free parcels of land and loans, so that they could become farmers.<sup>19</sup>

While Louis Riel was waiting for his ultimate fate, he wrote about the relationships between the Metis and the Indian. He also comments on the government's policy in dealing with the native issues of the prairies before 1885.

Now the government of Ottawa is guilty of all this towards the Metis. If at least, whilst robbing them of their patrimony, it had had enough conscience left to hand over to them, from year to year, at least a semblance of interest. It did the precaution to treat with the Indians; it recognized all their small camps, with their respective chiefs. It is true that the dominion caluminated "Big Bear" and his tribe before all the civilized world, because "Big Bear" and his Crees, although not knowing enough to demand the full value of their lands, had yet the good sense and judgment to refuse to give them up without a moderately profitable compensation.

It is true that whilst recognizing the other Indians, more timid and less clearsighted than "Big Bear", the dominion had been sharp enough to recognize them, neither the right to value their lands nor to fix a price upon them. It is true that its transactions with ignorant human beings that were dignified with the respectable name of treaties, were nothing but filchings of others property. It is true that instead of making the Indians die in as large numbers as it would have wished from absolute starvation, it had established in their midst a sort of agencies, intended apparently to make them disappear more slowly by rusty, rotten pork, uneatable lean bacon, and by dealing but as liberally as possible all the venereal diseases; by plunging the Indian girls and women around its forts into a demoralization impossible to describe. All this is true.<sup>20</sup>

The government having put down the 1885 rebellion dealt with the people who were left after all the shooting had stopped. The fate of Louis Riel was the result of a government which made its feelings known publicly. J. A. Macdonald stated that "Riel must hang though every dog in Quebec bay in his favor." The ultimate fate for Riel was he was hanged in Regina on November 16, 1885. Dumont, his military advisor, fled to the United States along with several other Metis who escaped the Battle of Batoche. The two great Indian Chiefs who sided with Riel, Big Bear and Poundmaker, were given long prison terms for their involvement in the Rebellion.

VI Conclusions

In the years following the rebellion up to present day society, the Metis people have suffered a great deal. Denied the opportunity to become farmers, the Metis left their settlements. They travelled north and west, to the forests, lakes and rivers in an attempt to escape the hostility and oppression of southern Canada. A commission was established in March 1885 to grant lands to the Metis, using the same criteria as had been used in Manitoba. But most of the Metis who received land again fell victim to land speculators. Those who chose "money scrip" were soon rid of this fast capital and were left destitute and poor. The Metis nation became scattered throughout the west, its people generally living in extreme poverty, waiting for whatever chance occupation might come along.

In his book, The Metis of Manitoba, Joe Sawchuk discusses the feelings of many Metis after the rebellion. He says:

Lagasse gives evidence that the Metis then began to deny their Indian heritage, identifying only with their European background. He quotes Dominion census figures which point to 2,000 fewer Metis of halfbreeds in Manitoba in 1886 than in 1870. The 1941 census, the last to include a separate listing for Metis, accounted for only 8,692; there had been 9,830 in 1870.<sup>21</sup>

It is estimated that there are in excess of half a million Metis in Canada today, and that the majority of them rank among the most poverty-stricken people in this country. They live in both rural and urban settings, and extremely few of them have enjoyed economic success in Canadian society. The contemporary Canadian Indian and Metis are still politically weak and economically dependent upon the dominant Canadian society; however, times are changing.

FOOTNOTES

1. And What About Canada's Native Peoples? Published by the Canadian Association in support of the Native People with the assistance of the Gladys and Merrill Muttart Foundation, Ottawa, Feb. 1976, p. 2.
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3. Ibid., p. 1.
4. Riel, Louis; The Globe Toronto, Monday, November 30, 1885.
5. Quoted in the Noonan and Hodges Committee Report, Vol. 7, AMNSIS Microfilm.
6. See 1868 House of Commons Debates.
7. Morris, A., The Treaties of Canada with the Indians, Coles publishing Co., Toronto, 1971.
8. Ibid., p. 294.
9. Ibid., p. 294
10. Official Report of the Debates of the House of Commons, July 6, 1885:3113.
11. Stanley, G.F., Birth of Western Canada, Chapters 10 and 11.
12. Stanley, G.F., Louis Riel, The Ryerson Press, 1972; p. 256.
13. Ibid., at p. 257.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., at p. 258.
16. Ibid., at p. 258.
17. House of Commons Debates 1884; Vol. IXA, AMNSIS Microfilm.
18. Stanley, G.F.G., The Birth of Western Canada - A History of the Riel Rebellions, London: Longmans, Green and Company Ltd. 1936 at p. 332.
19. Order-in-Council dated 13th July, 1885, supplemented by an Act of Parliament 48 - 49 Vic., Chap. 73.
20. Mika, Helma and Nick, The Riel Rebellion 1885, Mika Silk Screening Ltd., Belleville, Ontario, 1972, at p. 305 or see The Daily British Whig, Dec. 3, 1885.
21. Sawchuk, J., The Metis of Manitoba, Peter Martin Associates Ltd., 1978 at p. 32.