

WOMEN OF THE MÉTIS NATION



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WITH

ANNE CARRIÈRE-ACCO

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**A Nation cannot be defeated
until the hearts of its women
are on the ground.**

—Tsistsistas: Cheyenne proverb

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Maria Campbell's Foreword

To put together a book that honours the Women of the Métis Nation by remembering their names, their accomplishments, and their families is a raising up of our people and culture, and is indeed a celebration. For it was always the women—our grandmothers, mothers, and aunties—who were the cultural, spiritual, and in more recent times, the economic strength of our families and community life. Without them, times would have been much harder; for it was they who supplemented meagre family incomes with their sewing and crafts. Many of us remember the flickering lamps, late at night, and the bent heads of the women in our family as they beaded and embroidered beautiful jackets, moccasins, and gloves cut from the moose, deer, and elk hides they had scraped and tanned. They hooked and braided rag rugs, made willow and bark baskets, and pieced and quilted blankets, which were all sold or traded at the general store for cloth to be used for clothing, rubbers to be worn over moccasins, groceries, and if we were lucky, licorice candy. They cooked and cleaned, gardened, and delivered babies for the new settlers and were paid with ground grains. They planted huge gardens for their families, harvested and preserved wild berries, and smoked and dried bags of fish and meat. “It seemed like all they ever did was work,” a friend once laughed as she recalled the women in her family. Makes you wonder when on earth they ever had the time to tell us stories?”

But storytelling was something they did all the time. They wove the stories of *wahkotowin* and the histories of our people in and out of their beading, embroidery, and berry picking. In my own family I am not able to separate the memories of stories and woman's work. The two are interwoven. Everything was an opportunity to tell stories of birthings and deaths, of medicines and beautiful horses and, of course, about heroic men and women who were always, in some way, our *wahkomakanak*, *lee parawn*. Their stories were as rich and beautiful as the beaded, quilted, and embroidered clothing, colourful quilts, and rugs they made.

“*Ayee Kiyash mana*,” a *nohkom* would begin her story to the children gathered around her. “My uncle Patrice fought alongside Loowee Riel, and my *nohkom* cooked a big meal of *la patak* and *fricaseed wawpoos* for him while he was hiding from the soldiers.” From *nohkoms* like her, we also learned that everybody who took part at the Battles of Batoche, Fish Creek, and Duck Lake were related either by blood, by marriage, or by baptism, and that “looking after your family and each other was one of the laws of *wahkotowin*.”

It was these stories of family that we always loved the best. Of people with special gifts of “*mahtahsowin*”—healing, knowing, or seeing and, of women like Cecile Boyer Welsh (c.1843-c.1902), a buffalo hunter who led her own hunting brigades and was famous among our people, or Isabelle Falcon Trottier (1819-?), ancestor of Saskatchewan Métis Elder Nora Cummings. Isabelle was the daughter of Pierre Falcon (1793-1876), the Michif balladeer of Red River. She was a warrior and a crack shot and it is said that she took part at the Battle of Grand Coteau in 1851, and that many years later, when Gabriel Dumont was sharing war stories, he said that he was never worried when Isabelle was behind him for few men could outshoot her. There were also the brave stories of the women at Batoche, who gathered stones and nails when our warriors ran out of ammunition at Fish Creek or when Madame Josephte Tourond (1831-1928) walked among the warriors singing the songs the Métis sang at the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816, and as a result, Fish Creek was our victory.

Many stories like these and the names of the women are lost today due to dispersals and displacements of families from the old communities to urban centres. But, in spite of the loss, Métis women still remain a powerful influence today and have been far from silent about community needs and priorities. The hard-fought struggle for the education of their children has begun to

pay off as more Métis people graduate from universities with master's and doctoral degrees in law, history, medicine, engineering, and education. More women are entering leadership positions and are increasingly addressing national and international forums on issues pertaining to our people. They are writing and publishing books, making films, and doing art in spite of the ongoing colonial reality.

Today, family genealogies, our lives, our work, and stories are being researched and documented, not only by the scholarship of women like Sherry Farrell Recette, Heather Devine, Brenda Macdougall, Cheryl Troupe, and many others, but by Métis families themselves. They are all bringing a new pride and sense of family and place, and with it, an underlying commitment to the values learned by mothers, grandmothers, and all the other significant women in our lives. These stories are often accompanied with a particular recipe, or a beaded or embroidered design. For example, I have three beautiful framed pieces hanging on my wall. One, a delicate moose-hair tufting of woodland roses, the other, tiny circles of dyed horse hair to represent prairies flowers, and another of tiny asters, embroidered with dyed moose hair. Each was the design worn on the wedding collar, cummerbund, and leggings of a woman in our family, a tradition that inspired my oldest daughter to take up that art. I personally have recipes on the preparation and cooking of traditional Métis foods that have been taught and passed on, according to my late aunty Leda Gaudry, “for as long as our women have been around,” and which, with the help of family and friends, I have prepared and served at large celebrations and functions.

We are in a new and exciting times—exciting and sometimes scary because there is a new change happening. However, our roles and responsibilities as women will always remain the same, but are strengthened by hard-won rights and freedoms. And because of this, change is not so daunting and the journey forward is exciting. *Women of the Métis Nation* is michinn or muskike, because it names the women whose strength and love have bound us together to create a rich nation. It is the beginning of another new story, and like you, I am always ready for a new story.

Maarsi, hiy hiy, thank you Leah Dorion, Anne Carrière-Acco, and Lawrence Barkwell for this work, and thank you, Gabriel Dumont Institute Press for publishing this good book.

Maria Campbell
Gabriel's Crossing,
Batoche
2019

Métis Women are the heart and soul of the Métis people. Without them, there would be no Métis Nation. They are the strength behind our families, communities, and places of work. In the past, their kinship networks established where people settled and whom people married. Sovereign within their familial and community roles, they were the healers, the stewards of the land and its resources, the keepers of Indigenous knowledge, and the midwives who kept the Métis Nation nurtured, educated, and sustained. This tradition has continued into the present as Métis women have moved past their domestic and familial spheres into areas such as social advocacy, the arts, sports, law, post-secondary education, and entrepreneurship. Containing hundreds of biographies, *Women of the Métis Nation* is an ambitious role model book that documents more than 200 years of trailblazing Métis women.



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