

THE CANADIAN METIS

by

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Transcribed by David Morin

It is nearly eighty years since the Western Metis waged their battle for freedom and the democratic opening of the West. The Rebellion of 1870, ending in military defeat, none the less won for the earliest settlers of the West a place in the annals (sic) of the struggle for democratic freedoms and the right to participate in the building of Canadian nationhood.

We who still retain some measure of freedom must not forget the sacrifice and struggle with which our rights were bought. We should not fail to prepare ourselves for their continued existence. The history of our native peoples is a reminder (sic) that a tremendous (sic) price will be paid by Canadians if they treat lightly (sic) the memory of our past. Early Western history is shrouded in (sic) a conspiracy of silence by contemporary educators. The financial (sic) powers who dominate Canada are interested that we should not remember (sic) the splendid democratic (sic) traditions (sic) of our ancestors. Democracy is considered subversive.

The Metis people (sic) do not forget. The shame faced silence of our servile channels of entertainment today treat the earlier "uncouth plainsman (sic)" and settler as the incidental props accentuating the inane pantomimes (sic) of a celluloid hero in some major opus of putrescent Hollywood art. The Metis of the Old West were inspired by a passionate desire for freedom which is imbedded in our Canadian democratic tradition and has its roots deep in the past. It was born of a bitter struggle of a nomadic and hunting people against the encroachment of those economic forces which today dominates (sic) Canada. This attachment to the democratic spirit harks back to our French and Scottish forebears (sic) who brought to the "Pays d'en Haut" the spirit of independence which gave birth to the struggle in 1792 for popular reforms in the Canadas. It is the spirit which presided over the birth of Western Canada.

To fail to see in the Metis struggle an organic part of the revolutionary tradition of American democracy which opened (sic) the path to the capitalist development of Western Canada is to deprive our history of its social significance and historic meaning. Such a tendency exists today which finds its reflection in the distortion of Metis history. This peculiar attitude to Metis history leads historians to deprecate the importance of this decisive phase of Western history and to the rest of our "society" endeavoring to forget that such "struggles" ever took place. Orthodox (sic) histories accord them marginal reference as "rebellious" episodes. It is understandable. The predatory (sic) powers which opened the West are the vested interests of the entrenched money power of today. The class who through parliamentary manipulation (sic) and corruption were able to steal the resources of a vast western empire and build up its own wealth. They are no longer the bearers of our future. They have grown to hate democracy and to fear progress. They are afraid of the memory of the past.

The leaders of later democratic movements in the West have had no such inhibitions. A. E. Partridge, J. S. Woodsworth and Carl Axelson. They breathed deeply of the invigorating spirit of democracy. They were the heirs of the revolutionary Metis tradition.

By placing the Metis rebellions in their proper settings against the revolutionary background of the 19th century it is possible to evaluate with proper perspective the actual economic and social relationships out of which the struggle itself arose

What then was this background and what did it mean (sic) to the peoples of Western Canada?

The transition from the earlier mode of life based on a partially nomadic existence coupled with a primitive agricultural technique to modern society based on large scale machine industry and capitalist exploitation of wage labor extended over a very short period. The process worked itself out through a relentless social struggle between the insurgent defenders of a primitive economy and the land grabbing speculators secular and clerical alike whose economic future was bound up with the institutions and relationships of finance capital the free market free competitive production and "free" wage labor. In this struggle the Metis rebellions stand out as landmarks but they are by no means the only ones; the Grange Movement The (sic) Sinaluta Conference the Progressive Farm Movement (sic) The Winnipeg Strike and (sic) The Regina Trek are all continuing events of the same historical process

The transition from primitive social relationships to capitalism found its earliest political expression in the struggle to establish responsible government in the Red River. In the earlier Red River period Metis national feeling had been coalesced in the battle against the semi feudal centralization of the Hudson's Bay Company regime; and after the surrender of Rupert's Land it had been born again the exploiting vanguard of white settlement. When Upper and Lower Canada shook under the impact of the 1837-38 events the Red River Colony was still under the absolute sway of the Hudson's Bay Company. However excluded by history from direct participation in this great battle for democracy the local problem of resistance to monopoly was left unsolved. However the people of the West were by no means completely insulated against the democratic currents of the time. On the contrary it found its reflection in the curious and nearly (sic) forgotten episode of Dickson's Revolt in the Red River Valley of Minnesota

The influence of Mackenzie and Papineau inspired the wills and shaped the thoughts of the democratic stratum in the Red River in their struggle with the trading oligarchy and the dead weight of monopoly. The consciousness of the impending transition from one social and political (sic) form to another is clearly expressed by Louis L'Irlande (Louis Riel Sr) who at the conclusion of the Sayer Trial summed up in these words the creed of the Western democrats: "Vive La Liberte! La Commerce est Libre"

We do not suppose the actors in this drama clearly understood full significance of which they spoke; but there can be no doubt they were aware of its deep going character as an historic transition point in Western history

The movement for responsible government civil liberties and provincial status was in reality a further projection in a new arena of the long struggle for democracy in the Canadas. The Metis struggle of 1869-70 was directed in great measure against the Canafian (sic) party and of its annexationist influence (sic) Of this aggressive design there can be no question. With the influx of the Ontario element had come the advance wave of pecuniary adventurism the land grabbers and exploiters of every hue heralding the full panoply of colonial imperialism. The sedentary French were profoundly mindful of the struggle of (sic) their people against oppression and were nominally sympathetic to the Metis. While French Canadian (sic) protested and appealed for redress of their rights actual or implied under the Quebec and British North America Acts hard headed realists like of the types like Schultz Coldwell and Buckingham were carrying into effect the

policy which guaranteed the ruthless spoliation of the earlier settlers and the debasement of the native population. It was only the assumption of power by Riel's Provisional government exercising its prescriptive right the powers of a "de facto" government which ensured to the French speaking minority the constitutional guarantees of their religion and cultural rights.

The decade which preceded the Manitoba Act was marked by a victorious Union Army followed (sic) by an expanding American economy and the insistent pressures of Manifest Destiny. If the aggressive plans of the American Fenian movement huanyed (sic) the thoughts of the Fathers of Confederation directly inspired the moderate guarantees of the Manitoba Act. Its prime motivation was the Canadian desire to establish a secure and strategic buffer on the Red River against American expansionism. The aims of American expansion were clearly formulated by James Wickes Taylor, St. Paul lawyer and Special Agent of the U.S. Treasury. Sir John A. Macdonald belatedly grasped the strategic importance of liberal treatment toward the Red River Metis and that their adherence (sic) to Canada was necessary to preserve and enlarge Canadian nationhood. The influence of the Metis leaders was enough to neutralize any popular (sic) pro-American current that arose. The special guarantees of religious and language rights of the Manitoba Act was held up as in contrast to the possibility of losing them under the American republic. The responsible Metis leaders never wavered in their support of the interests of the British (sic) Crown.

The invaluable services rendered by the Metis was not forgotten by Governor Archibald.