

The Métis in the 21st Century Conference

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Saskatoon

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Ruth Swan: So let's compare this myth to what we know about the Pembina fur trade and what was actually going on at that time. Grant MacEwan suggests that they went back and were working for Alexander Henry at his Northwest Company post. This I doubt very much because Henry doesn't actually mention them, and, and what we see in Henry is that he doesn't usually say much about the opposition. Because they were Canadian, I'm assuming they were work, that Jean Baptiste was probably working for the, the XY Company, which amalgamated with the Northwest Company at the end of 1804. And because his Indian wife had three children, he must have been there at least four years, probably longer, before he left in 1806, so, or the fall of 1805. So he had been there for awhile, and he obviously had this connection with this woman. They had a family. It wasn't just, you know, a casual relationship. Through, through the genealogical sources, we know about the wife and, and the three daughters because there are people who have that connection, and I know one woman, a former nun, who's very proud of that. And they were called Lagimodières, and they had his name, and so they obviously always knew that.

Another interesting thing is, well, in the, the version by Dugast, the Indian woman is unnamed. Grant MacEwan calls her White Weasel, which I think is kind of pejorative, and he insinuates all sorts of very negative things about the Native women there, including the Indian wife of Alexander Henry, whom he describes variously as "fat," "broad hipped," "suggests all sorts of negative stereotypes about her, like that her food wasn't clean. And these were the kinds of things that Ed was quite upset about. The fact is that Alexander Henry's wife was probably quite young, she was probably ten years younger than Marie-Anne Gaboury. She is probably a teenager. She

probably had a couple of children at this point. She was Ojibway. He called her in his will the daughter of the Buffalo (the Buffalo was her father). He was an important Ojibway hunter with Henry at, at Pembina, and there's quite a bit about the Buffalo and his family in Henry's memoir, even though he doesn't talk about his own family. She later became known as Madeline Saulteaux, but I suspect that she wasn't baptized until after 1814, when he accidentally drowned.

So she apparently was the daughter of the Buffalo, and I suspect that she was probably friends with Marie-Anne Gaboury. And that they had young children the same age, they probably hung out together. And the daughter of the Buffalo probably taught her how to teach, how to learn, how to speak Ojibway, and to do skills, you know, that she could survive on the, on the Plains. Like tanning buffalo hides, making clothing, learning to cook, making pemmican, are all the things that she had to learn how to do. So when she was at Pembina, she wasn't there as a white woman bringing Christian culture from Quebec. She was there learning how to live like a wife of a, of a Freeman.

Then there's a very interesting confession scene, which the two authors handle differently. Dugast says that the Indian woman, woman found out about this plot to murder her through poisoning. Dugast says that it was bad medicine that she was employing. MacEwan says it was strictly poisoning. Anyway, one version is that the Indian woman warned Marie-Anne Gaboury about it in the MacEwan version. There's a much more developed plot where he finds out from the Indian woman about this idea that she's gonna get poisoned, and so he goes and he confesses that he had this relationship with this Native woman, and Marie is so upset that she has to deal with all this. And then she wakes up the next morning and forgives him and then they go on from there. The fact is they had to leave town quick, and so they got out of town and went to the Pembina Hills for several months. Now why was that? I don't think that it was probably because this Indian woman, who was later known as Josette, was probably gonna poison her. It was probably because her family were angry at Jean-Baptiste

Lagimodière for showing up unexpectedly with this unexpected wife. And so kin relationships were important in the trade, and probably he had ticked off a number of her relatives. And maybe they told him, you know, get out of town for awhile.

So there's all sorts of, you know, things that could have been going on, and obviously the Native wife makes a good scapegoat. In these different stories, the priest emphasizes her Christian values, whereas MacEwan emphasizes her gardening ability, her desire to grow turnips, and the values of race. Her pale skin, her blue eyes, and her blonde hair—all her non-Aboriginal values.

I think that Abbé Dugast must have known Marie-Anne Gaboury. She only died in 1875, and I think we can probably guess that these stories were part of family oral history, and he was the one that actually wrote it down. But Agnes Goulet, as I said, is a descendent and I think that she had these stories, too. And because she lived to be ninety-five years old, she was around, you know, to give her, her side of it. And obviously that doesn't necessarily put the Native people in the best light.

Paul Chartrand has talked about how Canadians need to challenge racist myths about Métis and Aboriginal people, and how they're used for political purposes. And Harry Daniels also talked about the need to challenge the myth of the two founding peoples in Canada, the English and the French. The myths of the Selkirk settlers and the Lagimodière/Gaboury family promote these racist values. I would argue that it's useful to use the historical method to do archival research, to do Métis genealogy and Métis oral history to find out what really happened to challenge these stereotypes and racist myths. Family history is a good way to nail down these stories with a wide variety of evidence, and I'm sure that most Métis descendants interested in their family trees could write biographies and stories that are more accurate and more interesting than what has been published in the past. Yesterday, a Métis teacher asked about how we can teach children more about Métis history, and I would argue that it's important to do research and, and publish these stories so that they can be used in the

classroom, in film and video projects and plays like at the Festival du Voyageurs and theatre projects.

The Lagimodières were important not because they were white, Catholic, and sowed turnips. They were important because they lived like the Freeman and their Aboriginal wives. They learned indigenous languages and technology and were eyewitnesses and participants to some important events in Red River history. Their children married into Métis families of the area, and Jean-Baptiste and Marie-Anne would become the grandparents of Louis Riel.

Marie-Anne Gaboury lived to be ninety-five years old in 1875, and apparently she had a special bond with Julie's oldest son. If Louis had lived, had had a chance to live that long, he would have lived until nearly 1940. What wonderful stories he would have shared with us, and I bet that he wouldn't have promoted his grandmother as the first white woman in the West.

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