

to the metaphysical. There is every indication that the "hiatus" ended with a decisive switch to the materialist philosophy of Marx. It was not simply intellectual curiosity which led Jim Brady to become a socialist and a Marxist. He arrived at a radical analysis because he was a worker in a world torn by the struggle between opposing social classes. He was part of the working class and absorbed the ideas that were debated and applied by working people in their struggle for social and economic justice.

In 1920s prairie society, the new order of the West, the term Half Breed was used almost exclusively as a derogatory term—a term used out of ignorance, bigotry and a lack of understanding of the history of the North West. It was reserved especially, though not exclusively, for those who had been rejected by that new order, those who dealt with bigotry by avoiding it, those who "kept to themselves." The people who, according to the Anglo-Saxon rules of entry, did not belong. In this scheme of things Jim Brady was not a Half Breed, for he belonged to the new working class. He was a Metis, and for the most part this meant much the same as ethnic background meant to the Ukrainian, German, Finnish or Swedish worker: it distinguished him from others, but it did not set him apart from the burgeoning industrial society.

The Half Breeds, among them those Indians who had given up or otherwise lost their treaty status, were a permanent feature of what Marx referred to as the "lumpen proletariat"—they were marginal to the dominant society, a class of people suspected and vaguely feared because they were misunderstood, a remnant of history lost in the turmoil of the settler society. It was a history the Half Breeds could not tell, for they had been defeated and were reminded of that defeat by the misery of their daily lives. Only those who, like Brady, could command a place, however modest, in the New World could afford pride in their heritage. And most of those had, perhaps unwillingly, denied their heritage in order to earn a place in that world.

While Brady was part of the prairie working class and was a student of its political struggle, his knowledge and pride in his Metis heritage was a powerful undercurrent in his life. And so, while 1932 marked his encounter with a long list of modern-day rebels, it was also distinguished by his meeting with an unlikely rebel fighting the cause of an unmodern people: "Joseph Dion, Indian school teacher and Metis leader." Dion was the first of a new generation of Metis leaders, Malcolm Norris among them, that Jim Brady would meet. And it was their struggle which would dominate the rest of his life.

II

The Alberta Struggle 1932-1943

4

L'Association des Metis d'Alberta et des Territoires du Nord Ouest

THE NATIONAL LIBERATION struggle of the Metis people had involved two armed confrontations with the Canadian government—at Red River in 1869-70 and on the South Saskatchewan in 1885. Red River was the fountainhead of Metis nationalism, the place where all Metis classes joined together to express the Metis national will. On the South Saskatchewan former Red River Metis workers and plains buffalo hunters took up that struggle in a final confrontation before massive settlement took place on the prairies. The only major area of Metis settlement which had not experienced or taken part in these struggles were the Metis of the mission settlements around Fort Edmonton-Lac Ste. Anne, St. Albert and Lac La Biche. After a forty-year hiatus it was the Metis of this area, now north central Alberta, who would take up the struggle once again.

The Metis of the prairies, the Red River middle-class free traders and freighters, farmers, workers and buffalo hunters, comprised what has been loosely called the Metis nation. The Metis of the northern bushland, though they were mixed bloods, lived the same life as the Indians of that area—the nomadic life of the fur trapper—and shared little of the national sentiment of their southern cousins. Many of the Metis of the Fort Edmonton area and farther north were among these nomadic people. Others, who chose to settle down in the mission settlements at the behest of their Catholic priests, lived a more sedentary life of domestic agriculture.

The Fort Edmonton area received an influx of Metis refugees after each of the confrontations with the Canadian government. After 1870 many of those trekking to the area from Red River were middle-class Metis,¹ forced off their land and attracted to the mission settlements because the life there was similar to that in the Red River area. Probably they were encouraged to go there by their clerical advisors. These middle-class French Metis had provided the leadership in the Red River

struggle and it was among these refugees (including Laurent Garneau) that sympathy ran highest for the rebellion of 1885. After 1885 this nationally conscious group of Metis was increased by yet more refugees, Metis patriots, many of whom settled on the St. Paul Metis reserve.²

The ranks of those Metis who shared the nomadic lifestyle of their Indian cousins, too, were swelled in the twentieth century by many treaty Indians who had given up their treaty status or were induced to give it up by Canadian authorities who wanted to reduce the number of Indians on reserves. These former Indians and their nomadic mixed blood cousins made up a large portion of the "Metis" population of Alberta by the 1930s—perhaps as many as one-third of the estimated 10-12,000 population³ (the vast majority of whom lived in the north central region of the province and the Peace River district). It was to this group of native people that the whites most viciously applied the derogatory status of Half Breed.

There was an equally large number of Metis with origins in the south—sedentary Metis who had lived for generations in Metis settlements, farm laborers and wage workers, and those who perhaps owned small plots of land. These were Metis whose background and mode of life had made entry into the mainstream of prairie society possible. Because they worked for wages and lived a settled life, they were considered "progressive" according to the Anglo-Saxon standards which predominated in settler society. Closely allied to these "progressive" Metis were the remnants of the Metis middle class, mostly farmers and ranchers and a few businessmen—the educated elite of the Metis and those generally with the most developed national consciousness.⁴

The remainder of the Metis population might find themselves in either of the main classes—the nomadic or the working class—depending on economic conditions. Like their predecessors at Red River, many Metis, when confronted by aggressive and bigoted white competition for land or jobs, chose to return to living off the land, to retreat to their former mode of life rather than endure or fight racial abuse.

Thus the north central area of Alberta, by the 1900s, had become a final refuge of Metis nationals, a refuge which saw all classes and remnants of classes represented. Because of legal differences in the status of native peoples, those Indians who had relinquished treaty status were seen as "Metis" or Half Breeds by the Canadian and provincial authorities. North central Alberta, situated in that transition zone between the heavy bush of the commercial forest belt and the prairie farm land, accommodated all these different classes. The land was mostly Crown land owned, in the 1920s, by the Dominion government. The government's policy of benign neglect permitted nomadic Metis and ex-treaty Indians to live as squatters, following their

hunting and fishing mode of life.

In a sense it was a reprieve from the onslaught of industrial development which had swept over the southern prairies—a reprieve that would last until the pressures of settlement or other resource development finally reached the Metis' area of retreat. It was a reprieve that would not last much longer and one that was, by the 1920s, hardly deserving of the name. While the Metis had squatters' "rights," they had little else: they went without medical services, schooling or relief. Whole communities were virtually immobilized by malnutrition and such contagious diseases as tuberculosis and venereal disease. Their increasing numbers and pressure from the south were gradually depleting their wildlife resource. Increasing government regulation of wildlife brought the need for licences, limits on the amount killed and hunting seasons aimed at conservation—all of which threatened Metis self-sufficiency and their ability to live outside the influence of white society. While their economy was being undermined, rulings regarding the implementation of the Alberta Relief Act made most of those Metis in need ineligible because of their positions as squatters.⁵

The Metis and ex-treaty Indians endured these conditions throughout most of the 1920s and even earlier, but in the latter part of that decade they would be moved to action by a threat to the one thing they did have: the right to be on the land. Pressure was mounting to open the previously marginal land in the region as land in the south was taken up. In 1928 the Dominion government began preparations to transfer its jurisdiction over Crown lands to the provincial governments, and the provinces intended to open the lands to homesteading. The native people most threatened by this expansion of settlement were the semi-nomadic Metis and former treaty Indians who depended on the bushlands to support their traditional economy. And it was these native people who would initiate the rejuvenation of the Metis national liberation movement dormant since 1885.*

At the turn of the century a number of Metis families, of French and Scottish descent, had settled on forest reserve land at Fishing Lake, a few miles west of the Alberta-Saskatchewan border and forty miles east of St. Paul des Metis. In 1928 this hunting and fishing settlement became aware of government plans to open the forest reserve to

*For many Indian and Metis the only distinction between them was legal—when treaties were signed individuals had the choice of becoming treaty or taking Metis scrip. The movement which was to grow in 1930s Alberta was a broad movement for social and economic change; it was not a narrowly nationalistic movement. Its objectives applied to all people of Indian ancestry outside treaty, regardless of their former status. To simplify matters I will use the term Metis to refer to all non-treaty native people unless there is reason to distinguish between them. I will use the term native people to refer to all people with Indian ancestry, including treaty Indians.

agricultural homesteading. The Metis understood that squatters' rights would no longer be recognized. Informal meetings began discussing the implications of the government plan. The threat to their land and the recognition that they had no legal rights prompted the Metis, under the leadership of Charles Delorme and Dieudonne Collins, to propose a reserve which would be set aside for exclusive Metis use.⁶

The small Metis band at Fishing Lake were unable to make their feelings known to the authorities for two years. Being excluded from both the economy and the political process of the new society, the Metis simply did not know how to lobby the government. In addition, no formal leadership or democratic representation existed. Meetings were held, issues discussed, proposals made, but the protests might just as well have been shouted to the wind.⁷

The nomadic Metis and Indians, when they had a problem outside the family, traditionally approached an outside intermediary, often the local RCMP constable, Hudson's Bay manager or priest. In this case they approached Joe Dion, a school teacher at the nearby Keehewin Indian Reserve.

Dion was born in the Keehewin Reserve and was a nephew of Big Bear, one of the most powerful chiefs to support Riel in 1885. He was an enfranchised Indian, one of many Indians who had given up their treaty status in order to gain the rights of ordinary Canadian citizens. Dion had been a teacher on the reserve since 1915 and knew the area and its people well. Dion recalled, "I had always taken a lively interest in the welfare of the Half Breeds. On several occasions I was reprimanded [by the Indian Affairs Branch] for my insistence in accepting Half Breed children in my little Indian school. . . ."⁸

By this time rumors of the establishment of a Metis reserve had spread. "Several families were reported on their way, from Saskatchewan, from southern Alberta, and even from the United States."⁹ On May 24, 1930, Dion attended a meeting of about 30 Metis held at the Frog Lake Indian Reserve. He later described the events of that night:

In the course of the meeting I asked a William Cardinal with whom I happened to be sitting, if at any time somebody had taken these talks on paper, or had an official of any kind ever attended these meetings. These are the very words Mr. Cardinal spoke: "No, this is as far as we've ever gone, we make a lot of speeches, then go to our homes believing that we had accomplished something."

Up to this time and since for that matter I had always looked upon the [situation of] the Half Breed as being far superior in every way to that of the Treaty Indian with whom I had always

associated. I had seen St. Paul des Metis at its best, good homes, some nice farms, beautiful horses and carriages, when everybody had plenty to eat and good clothes to wear. It was at this meeting at Frog Lake that I realized the true conditions to which the Half Breed had degenerated, so it was toward the close of the meeting when called upon to give my idea of the situation as I saw it, that I may have said things which were not complimentary. . . . The upshot of this flare of mine was that I was delegated then and there to go and present the Half Breed case to the authorities in Edmonton. I had unintentionally imposed upon myself a task which I knew not in the least how to tackle.¹⁰

Although Joe Dion, a pious man sympathetic to the Metis, was ill-equipped to represent the Metis, he took his unasked for responsibility as seriously as any elected leader. With his drafting, the Alberta Metis had begun what would become a province-wide political movement that would put the lie to the conventional wisdom that portrayed the Metis as a pacified and docile people, accepting whatever fate had in store for them.

The Metis cause moved slowly in the first year. There is no evidence that Dion approached the government in 1930. In June that year he called another meeting which was attended by 50 Metis and the local MLA, Loda Joly of the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA).¹¹ An election was in progress and Joly, no doubt seeking the Metis vote, promised his support.

It was likely that the next year saw much discussion of the land issue among the Metis of northeastern Alberta. But there was not much else. It was not until the summer of 1931 that Dion called another meeting to discuss the land issue. It was evident that the past year's discussion had spread concern over the issue beyond Fishing Lake. Metis from all of northeastern Alberta recognized that their interests also were at stake. The meeting took place on the shores of Cold Lake, some 40 miles north of Fishing Lake. Two hundred Metis attended from communities within seventy miles of Fishing Lake.

Metis agitation was growing and as it spread it attracted the interest of politicians. Joly had been defeated in the 1930 election by J.M. Dechene, a Liberal. Dechene and the federal Liberal member for Athabasca, J.F. Buckley, also attended the meeting. The Liberal Party had always considered the Metis to be "their" constituency—due in large part to the influence of the Catholic Church.

Until this meeting Joe Dion had simply acted as the mouthpiece of an unorganized, if growing, group of Metis settlers. No attempt had been made to form an organization, elect representatives or formalize the concerns of the Metis in a constitution. As the number of Metis



Brady (second from left) at bush camp with friends, 1 to r, Sain Parenteau, Harry Patenaude, Alphonse Patenaude, Francis Poitras, 1943.



Jim Brady at St. Paul, 1918.

concerned had quadrupled, and the area from which they came expanded, the Metis now needed more than a spokesman. The meeting appointed six delegates from among the various settlement and area representatives. These "councillors," who included the two originators of the movement, Charles Delorme and Dieudonne Collins, were instructed to have the Metis in their area sign a petition. While the petition has not survived, it is likely that the sole concern was land tenure.

The councillors soon collected over 500 names, and on August 13 they forwarded the petition to the provincial government. Another meeting had been called for August 29, and through Dechene the Metis invited the minister of lands and mines, R.G. Reid, to attend. Dechene reflected general white reaction to the Metis agitation when he wrote to Reid: "I am astounded by the size of the movement."¹²

Neither Reid nor any other government official accepted the invitation to the meeting. As a result a delegation was appointed to meet with the government. The delegation included Dion, Liberal MP Buckley, Liberal MLA Duchene and Metis businessman Alphonse Brosseau from St. Paul. Misfortune struck the delegation before it had a chance to even meet; J.F. Buckley was killed in an accident and Alphonse Brosseau became seriously ill. Unable to strike another delegation, the Metis decided to send Dechene and Dion to Edmonton.

But the government was still unprepared to move on the Metis' grievances. It was not until the following April that the government recognized the existence of a "Metis problem." The Metis had held yet another general meeting, this time at St. Paul, in March. Resolutions noting the Metis' desire for rights to the land were passed and forwarded to the government. The following month the government responded with a questionnaire to be distributed among the Metis. It included questions regarding scrip issue, homestead rights, the kinds of livestock and machinery owned and the Metis' attitude toward farming.¹³

The questionnaire and the government's decision to have the fledgling Metis organization distribute it was a major victory. First, the government admitted, in selecting only Metis for the questionnaire, that the Metis were viewed by the government as a group deserving special consideration. Equally important, the government tacitly recognized the Metis organization despite the fact that it barely existed as a formal body, had no constitution and was not chartered by the province as an organization. However, the victory concealed dangers within it. The government may have been attempting to defuse the loosely organized Metis before they became a political force to be reckoned with. And Canadian governments in the past had conferred special status on native people for only one reason: to remove or otherwise pacify them

A.W. Norris



Malcolm Norris, probably at his Slave River trading post, early 1920's.

A.W. Norris



Norris clowning with moose, N.W.T., 1936.

in order to facilitate the settlement of the West.

From the spring through the fall of 1932 the movement continued to grow. The many local and occasional general meetings radicalized the Metis. Public discussion of the land question led to the airing of other grievances. The grievances were many: terrible health conditions, the lack of schools, the lack of jobs and the refusal of municipal authorities to grant relief to many destitute Metis families. Not only was the movement spreading to all the communities of Northern Alberta, it was broadening into a movement for basic human rights. It was a movement, however, which was surpassing Dion's limited political skills. As Dion himself had said, "I know my people better than anyone else does. Of politics I know nothing."¹⁴ Yet it was, now, precisely politics that he needed to know.

Despite his inadequacy Dion continued to organize, a role far more complex than his original assignment of delivering grievances to the government. In the summer of 1932 Dion travelled to almost a dozen communities, encouraging residents to organize and discuss the issues. A general meeting was held July 15-16 at which several resolutions were passed—including resolutions on the new issues of hunting and fishing rights. All resolutions were held in abeyance pending a provincial convention in December that Dion hoped would attract delegates from every northern community. Dion's other concern during the summer was the government questionnaire, and he combined his initiative in organizing local communities with his efforts to have as many questionnaires completed as possible. Dion believed that the size of the land settlement was related to the number of Metis stating their desire to settle on the land. And, reflecting the real nature of the native problem, both Metis and ex-treaty Indians—among the most destitute of native people—filled out the questionnaires.

The movement was reaching a critical stage. Although Metis were clear about their grievances, the movement was still without focus and the political expertise crucial to successful lobbying. Dion's view of politics was naive. He was convinced, after discussions with civil servants, that the movement would soon achieve its aims once the government knew how many Metis wanted land and realized that the Metis cause was just.

Jim Brady, however, believed that the struggle was just beginning. It is likely that Brady joined the movement at the March 1932 meeting in St. Paul. Brady could hardly have avoided contact with the Metis agitation as St. Paul was the headquarters of the local politicians. J.F. Buckley had lived there, and Brady had met Buckley and Dechene through his father as early as 1930. Brady would certainly have known the two Metis who were prominent in the early stages of the movement—Norbert Beauregard, the local "councillor," and

Alphonse Brosseau, the Metis businessman who had been chosen as one of the delegates to the government.

Brady first contacted Dion by letter in May 1932.¹⁵ Brady requested information about a meeting of Metis being planned that summer. He advised Dion that the Metis must be formally organized, and emphasized the need to build strong leadership groups in each community or area. He was already communicating with the new Conservative MP for the district, P.G. Davies, in an effort to gather documentation from Ottawa for the Metis case. Jim Brady had long been a student of politics; he was about to graduate to the real world of politics.

Joe Dion immediately recognized in Brady a valuable ally. He was already apprehensive about the widespread involvement of politicians in the movement. The by-election victory of the Conservative Davies was based on election promises of support for the Metis cause. Both Liberals and Tories were exploiting the Metis issue and using it to pressure a UFA populist government. Because of the politicians' involvement, many of the Metis in the movement were suspicious of Dion's political motives. His defence, "I am working for the Half Breeds," was not always satisfying.¹⁶ Dion was clearly delighted to find another Metis, unconnected with any political party, wanting to work with him. He agreed with Brady's advice and told Brady that he was counting on him.¹⁷

Brady was not cast in the mold of the popular organizer, and except for his own area Brady apparently was content to leave the organizing to Dion. But Brady already revealed an ability to formulate strategy which would become associated with his name. The Fishing Lake Metis and their appointed leader had initiated the movement. The St. Paul Metis and Jim Brady were plotting the movement's future.

Brady and his St. Paul colleagues concentrated on the province-wide convention that had been called for December 28 at St. Albert. Prior to the convention the St. Paul Metis produced a constitution for a new Metis organization—L'Association des Metis de L'Alberta. The constitution stated that the organization was "formed for the mutual benefit and the interest and the protection of the Metis of the province of Alberta and is a non-political and non-religious society having as its sole purpose the social interest and uplifting of the members of the Association and the Metis people of the said province of Alberta."¹⁸

The constitution laid out practical economic and social goals. The association would not be narrowly nationalistic and all British subjects with Indian ancestry—whether treaty Indian, non-status Indian or Metis—were eligible for membership. The document also outlined the structure of the organization's executive council and stipulated yearly elections—details which were eventually incorporated by the provincial

association.

More importantly, the document dealt with the ultimate administration of the Metis reserves—lands would be non-transferable and remain in the hands of the Crown, specifically, the Department of Lands and Mines; the government would be “guided by elected reeves and councillors of the reserve subject to the approval of the executive council [of the association]”;¹⁹ the clergy would be granted limited rights and land on each reserve; a resident doctor would be hired for each district and indigent Metis would be treated free (“as under the Indian Act”); an industrial school would be established, and schools on each reserve would be allotted 40 acres.

The provisions for Metis independence on the reserves were particularly significant. There was already concern that the government would view the reserves as welfare colonies and the residents as government wards. In a provision that turned out to be remarkable for its foresight, the document specified that the Metis association—through its executive council—would be the supreme governing body of all Metis on the reserves. It was a provision that was aimed, almost certainly by Brady, at countering the possibility of the movement being weakened and divided once the reserves were established. While Dion showed little interest in such details, they were foremost in Jim Brady’s mind.

The final general meeting of Metis before the December convention was held in July at Lac Ste. Anne. Fifteen new councillors were elected, bringing the total to 25. In two years Joe Dion had provided the movement with a significant base. Jim Brady had already mapped out the plan for the building of the organization and had a clear idea of the goals to pursue in the establishment of the Metis reserves or settlement areas. The December convention would officially launch the Metis’ campaign to force the government to act on their grievances and their demand for land.

The Metis could be pleased with the two leaders they had found in their ranks. Jim Brady would prove himself crucial to the new association; his talent for analyzing the dynamics of government, of identifying motives of politicians, of planning strategy, tactics and defensive manoeuvres, would provide the movement with the steady hand necessary to guide it in its struggle against forces which were far more powerful and sophisticated. Brady looked beyond the immediate struggle and planned for the day when the battle might seem to be won but was in fact just entering another stage. Brady would provide vision and continuity in the struggles ahead. Joe Dion was an appropriate leader for the Metis people: pious and devout, he shared the deep religious conviction of the Metis. His devotion to the Church would prove most valuable as it legitimized political activity, which might

otherwise have been forestalled by Metis piety. It would serve, also, to defuse opposition from the Catholic clergy. However, neither Dion nor Brady was a charismatic figure who could attract people or spark them to determined struggle. Jim Brady was more intellectual recluse than agitator; Joe Dion was a capable organizer who easily won the love of his followers, but he was unable to inspire the Metis to fashion their own liberation. For these things the Metis movement would come to rely on Malcolm Norris.

It is not known how Norris first became involved in the movement. He may have met Dion on the latter's travels in the summer of 1932. Certainly Norris knew Metis in north and central Alberta and would have been informed of the Metis agitation. There is evidence that his involvement started just before the December convention itself. Some claim that he was drafted into the movement with his particular talents in mind.²⁰

Malcolm Norris was an agitator and orator. Soon after he joined the movement Norris was tagged "Dynamite." The name was apt as he was quick-witted and a master of the Cree and English languages. Of the Metis leaders present at the December convention, it was Norris who left the most lasting impression.²¹ His spirited call to action and his tremendous energy and optimism gave the Metis something they had not had for two generations—the belief that they could win. Norris' fierce pride in past Metis victories and his own Indian ancestry, his strident indignation, and perhaps most importantly, his unlimited faith in the common people, offered the Metis some of the self-respect which had been taken from them over the past half century. For a people who had experienced so many defeats, it was an extraordinary contribution.

On December 28, 1932 the Metis regrouped in a new, formal organization: L'Association des Metis d'Alberta et des Territoires des Nord Ouest.* Thirty-three councillors (as well as many other observers) representing as many Metis communities gathered to confirm the goals of the movement, goals expressed simply and clearly by Felix Callihoo:

Our first objective and the one in which we have our deepest interest, the one which more than anything else called our movement into being, is to see that adequate provision is made for our homeless and destitute families...to see that proper provision is made for the education of our children [and] also provision of a better system of medical attention.²²

All these issues were contained, depended upon and were expressed in one clear and unmistakable demand: the demand for land.

*The Metis of the North West Territories never took an active part in the association.

As was the practice before and after the founding convention the association forwarded the resolutions passed to the provincial Department of Lands and Mines. The resolutions indicated that the Metis were well prepared to deal with the government: their objectives were clear. The brief to the government described eleven areas which would be suitable for Metis settlements. Although the areas had not been carefully researched, the Metis wished to establish at the outset that many areas were required to accommodate the Metis interested in the project and the diverse economic activity—from traditional to agricultural and industrial—anticipated.

Two other resolutions at the convention were noteworthy. The term Half Breed, once a purely descriptive term and now one of racist abuse, was permanently dropped from the movement's vocabulary. Another resolution, probably put forward by Brady, was aimed at giving the Metis control over education on the settlements—and taking it away from the Catholic Church, which had enjoyed almost a century of unrestricted domination of the Metis through control of the schools.

While the Metis reconfirmed old objectives, their convention heralded a new resolve to meet those objectives. That resolve was most dramatically demonstrated by the organization's first elected executive council: president, Joseph Dion of Guerneville, teacher; first vice-president, Malcolm Norris of Edmonton, prospector; second vice-president, Felix Callihoo of St. Paul, rancher; third vice-president, Henry Cunningham of St. Albert, farmer; secretary-treasurer, James Brady of St. Paul, laborer.

There was one other Metis who would play a particularly active role in the association. Pete Tomkins was from the Grouard district in the Peace River area of northwestern Alberta. He was educated, a farmer and a blacksmith. His father, Pete Tomkins, Sr., was arrested by Riel's men while repairing a telegraph line cut by Metis soldiers. While in detention he discussed with Riel the Metis leader's utopian plans for a "democratic West" and as a result became an ardent admirer and supporter of the Metis people. After the fighting Tomkins married the Indian woman who had fed the Metis prisoners—the daughter of the famous, and undefeated, Cree chief, Poundmaker.²³

The addition of Tomkins to the movement in early 1933 (he was not formally elected to office until 1934, when he became third vice-president) rounded out the core of the Metis leadership—not long after that Dion, Brady, Norris and Tomkins became known among the Metis people as "the big four." Tomkins was ideally placed. The Grouard district was the only area of the north still to be organized, and the Metis population there was extremely poor. Tomkins was an excellent organizer and remained close to the Metis people in his everyday work. He was also a renowned folklorist and story teller. He

possessed a knack for smoothing over the many disagreements that threatened to divide the organization. Family, clan, personal and political quarrels were common in Metis communities and Tomkins would often be called upon to intervene on behalf of Metis unity.²⁴

The goals were clear and the movement was now headed by leaders whose talents and relationship to the Metis community were in remarkable harmony. Of these leaders, Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady would play the most decisive roles. For these two men the struggle of the Alberta Metis marked the beginning of a lifelong friendship and political partnership in which they would share a commitment not only to the Metis but to the struggles for social justice of all poor and working people.

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5

The Rebirth of Metis Nationalism

THE MOST REMARKABLE feature of the founding convention of the Metis Association of Alberta was its historical meaning: it represented the rejuvenation, after a hiatus of over two generations, of the Metis' national liberation struggle. For while the movement was initiated by the poorest of the Metis—and was working for those “homeless and destitute” people—it was being led by the advanced working- and middle-class Metis. The executive council and the large majority of the 33 councillors were workers or land owners. These same classes of Metis had played the leading role in the struggles of 1869-70 and 1885. It was these classes, after 1885, who began a process of integration into the new economic order—an integration which effectively left the nomadic, poorer classes of Metis to endure their colonial conditions by themselves.

A large majority of the leadership of the new organization were French Metis. This factor and the French name of the organization recalled the history of the Metis national struggles, which had always drawn their militant leadership from among the French Metis. While the organization quickly became known by its English derivative (the Metis Association of Alberta) due to the general dominance of the English language, the convention testified to the fact that, in Alberta, Metis nationalism was French and Catholic.

In the nineteenth century the Metis were the nationals of the North West; their nationalism was based on the fur trade and was expressed as opposition to the colonial exploitation of the Hudson's Bay Company. All classes were involved because all classes had economic interests in the struggles that took place. But in twentieth-century Alberta, Metis nationalism had undergone fundamental changes. The struggle was principally in the interests of the destitute nomadic people; middle-class and working-class Metis had little economic self-interest in the struggle. Clearly, some of those Metis farmers who had been forced off the land

and some Metis workers who wanted land saw the struggle as in their interests. But principally the advanced Metis were drawn to the movement by nationalist sentiment—a renewed feeling of kinship with their poorer cousins. It was in this weaker nationalist sentiment, based more on sympathy than self-interest, that danger lay. For economic interests—class differences—might lead the more advanced Metis to eventually abandon the struggle, just as many had after 1869-70 and 1885.

This was not the only potential danger facing the movement. Among the “big four” there were serious ideological differences: Brady and Norris were radical socialists, Tomkins a more moderate social democrat and Dion a man whose vision of the future was guided more by Catholicism than politics. The political differences would lead to different visions of how the settlement colonies would serve the Metis. Norris and Brady would see the colonies as an independent economic base for Metis self-determination. Tomkins sympathized with this view, but he and, particularly, Dion focussed mostly on the short-term alleviation of suffering.

More important than the differences between the leaders were the widely varying sentiments of the Metis population. The most destitute, nomadic people saw the land as a place of refuge from white society, a guarantee that they could remain apart. For others—those farmers who had lost their land, workers who desired land to farm—the colonies meant a renewed opportunity to take part in the mainstream economy of Canada.

Yet all these differences, all these potential dangers, would remain in the background during the fight for land. As long as land eluded the movement, the demand for land would give the movement unity. As long as the movement was for land—and not over how the land would be used—it would reveal itself as an anti-colonial struggle, a struggle characterized by Franz Fanon, the black Algerian revolutionary of a future generation:

For a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.¹

For the Metis, a small minority with no economic power and little political power, that struggle would be difficult. Brady used to summarize the Metis reality by adapting a phrase from Lenin. He wrote: “The Metis have no other weapon except organization.”² It was only through Metis unity expressed in a strong organization that the association could force concessions from the government.

The goal of the Metis movement was land. The focus of its

organized strength would be the government. It was the government—the state—which controlled land, which held the power necessary to establish settlement areas for the Metis. Because of this the association, throughout its history, dealt with government departments and agencies, bureaucrats and politicians. During the depression this political focus was not out of step with the general political trend. The capitalist economic system was on the verge of collapse, and the government, the political expression of that system, was under continuous pressure from the victims of unemployment and the accompanying disaster of the drought.

The struggle with the government would require the talents of the big four, but in particular it would depend on Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady. Norris most often acted as the movement's catalyst and overseer. His charismatic optimism carved out the role of ensuring that the locals of the association remained active and that unity was maintained. He saw clearly that the foundation of the movement was based on regular local meetings, the continuous discussion of issues and grievances, the practice of democratic politics. While all the executive members organized their own areas, Norris took on the informal role of provincial organizer.

The Metis' fight was for land and as such it was not complicated by ideological strife, strife which was a major feature of the workers' and farmers' struggles going on around them. Because of the simplicity of the Metis' objective the main issues facing the movement were questions of strategy and tactics: how would the Metis use their political strength to achieve their ends? This aspect of the Metis movement made Jim Brady its key figure. His talent, his passion, for political analysis, for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing sides, would direct the energies of his three colleagues and the Metis people.

Brady formulated three strategies for the Metis struggle and ordered them according to his assessment of their effectiveness, their relationship to the Metis forces and the issue at hand. They were, in the order in which he ranked them: petition (direct, public pressure on the government), constitutional rights and the ballot.³ If direct petitioning of the government failed, Brady believed the association should turn to the courts. Only as a last resort would the Metis try to make gains through electoral political action.

It is likely that Brady began the process of tactical choice even before the association was formally organized. In the summer of 1932 P.G. Davies, the federal Conservative MP for Athabasca, petitioned the federal government on the question of Metis scrip* and the status of

*It was a common claim by Metis all across the prairies that verbal government promises had been made to the effect that scrip would be issued to the Metis in 1915 and 1930.

Metis land entitlement. The federal government's reply made it clear that they were unwilling to assume responsibility for the Metis and that a court battle would be necessary to force them to recognize any land claims by the Metis.⁴ Brady realized that the outcome of such a court battle would be uncertain and that the Metis' strongest weapon, organization, would be completely ineffective in a legal struggle. Brady felt this option was viable only if direct action by the association failed. The third option—the ballot—was clearly the least desirable, because of the small number of Metis voters and the difficulty of getting the vote behind one political party.

The United Farmers of Alberta, like all governments during the depression, was facing serious political difficulties due to its failure to deal effectively with the economic crisis. Brady, undoubtedly aware of this, concluded that a government in trouble was more likely to respond to pressure. Thus a mass movement, using petitioning tactics and identifying itself, in Brady's words, as "non-political and non-religious"⁵ was to be the collective weapon of the Metis people.

Malcolm Norris, the only member of the executive committee permanently established in Edmonton, spoke for the movement and communicated with politicians, pressuring them to take action. Towards the end of February 1933 Norris attended the sittings of the Alberta Legislature and reported to Brady: "I [have] been taken up by the lions in their den, the Legislative Assembly. Some keen discussion has arisen [on the Metis question]. . . The debate shall resume next Monday the 27th. I shall be present with a stenographer to take down the gist of the proceedings."⁶

To what extent Norris' lobbying was responsible for the legislature's discussion of the issue is not clear. But until that point the Metis leaders had been dealing with government—politicians and bureaucrats—behind closed doors, out of view of the public and the press. The petitioning strategy included the public airing of grievances, and using the legislature provided an unequalled opportunity. That Norris planned to take a stenographer to the proceedings on February 27 suggests he expected a major development. He was not disappointed.

Two politicians were vying for Metis votes: the provincial Liberal MLA of St. Paul, J.M. Dechene, and the aforementioned Davies. Dechene, an associate of James Brady, Sr., fancied himself the undisputed champion of the Metis cause, to which end he branded Davies a latecoming opportunist. Late arrival or no, it was Davies, indirectly, who drew first blood in the legislative battle to win the hearts of the Metis.

Davies had written numerous letters to the UFA premier of Alberta, J.E. Brownlee, asking for information about the government's policy regarding the Metis and putting forward his own suggestions for a

settlement plan. Brownlee replied that the province would not accept total responsibility for the "problem" and that Ottawa must share in any solution. Brownlee soon let Davies' letters go unanswered for months, and in response Davies changed his strategy. He had the Conservative House Leader in the provincial legislature, D.M. Duggan, formally challenge the provincial government.⁷

Duggan's public challenge embarrassed the UFA and Premier Brownlee as details of the Metis' situation were read into the public record. The issues were so compelling that the government was forced to commit itself to some concrete plan by the beginning of the next session in February 1934. The political scramble in the legislature saw Duggan move a motion, the premier amend it, and the out-manoeuvred Liberal, Dechene, finally get his shot in with a final amendment which carried the day. It read, in part:

Resolved that the Government should, during the next year, keeping particularly in mind, the health, education, relief and general welfare of the half-breed population, continue its study and enquiry into the problems and present its recommendations to this assembly within ten days of the commencement of the next session thereof.⁸

The government seemed primarily concerned with avoiding controversy and full responsibility for the Metis. Yet its response to the whole question was straightforward. It did not approve of any scheme that would leave the Metis as permanent wards of the state like the Indians. It had serious doubts, shared by most whites at the time, that the Metis were good candidates for agricultural settlement. In response to Metis demands the government was studying the issue through questionnaires being gathered by the Metis association. Further, Brownlee mentioned the possibility of an impartial commission to study the problem.

The apparent willingness of the government to confront the issue must have created some optimism. There was reason to hope—the questionnaires, the government's willingness to recognize the association and the all-party support of the legislature—that the government and the association might agree on locations for the settlement areas before the year end.

With this in mind the executive committee focussed on three immediate aims. The first involved the government questionnaires drawn up in 1932 to determine the conditions faced by the Metis and the Metis' views on settlement areas. The gathering and completion of these forms was in the hands of the Metis organization. It was crucial that as many questionnaires as possible be completed and turned over to the government, for it was the Metis leaders' view, encouraged by the

government, that no action would be taken until it was clear the Metis supported their organization.

At the same time the executive committee concentrated on building the association through strengthening and increasing the locals throughout the province. The movement's success was due primarily to the demonstration of widespread discontent. The association had to continue to demonstrate its political unity, its influence in the Metis communities and its ability to rally support among a majority of Metis.

The third and most difficult task involved the selection of land for the various settlement areas. This was a lengthy process requiring expert study of the areas in question. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this project was reaching a consensus among the Metis about which areas were suitable. In addition, the association considered it critical that the executive, or members of it, be directly involved with the government in making the final decisions on the locations.⁹

These three tasks, considering the obstacles, were a severe test. The association was chronically broke. Dues were kept to a minimum of 25 cents per year. Passing the hat at meetings seldom brought more than five or six dollars. Had it not been for the contributions of the executive and some of the wealthier Metis (and James Brady, Sr.) the association could not have functioned at all.

Besides the continual financial crisis the time and energy of the executive committee was stretched to the limit. The four principal leaders were scattered across the north, making communication and decision-making difficult. Yet each was well placed for other tasks. Pete Tomkins in Grouard was able to oversee and organize the whole northwest Peace River area; Brady and Dion played a similar role in the northeast. Norris, living in Edmonton, was close to government officials and the opposition politicians, people who would continue to play an important role in association tactics.

The four men had to sustain themselves in a period when living wages were almost impossible to find. Norris spent most of 1933 on relief. Dion was teaching at Keehewin Reserve but found himself unemployed after July. Brady tried his hand as an apprentice printer in 1933 but soon gave it up. He likely spent most of the summer and fall farming the family land at St. Paul.

Brady's "Report of the Secretary Treasurer" for the year ending March 1933 was sparse in detail. There were 27 locals, 34 Metis organizers (who were also in charge of questionnaires) and 560 questionnaires completed and turned in. Total debits were \$67, cash "sent in" was \$66.90—to which Tom Norris, Malcolm's brother, had contributed \$30.90. Expenses covered travel by Dion and Brady, convention costs, lawyers' fees and office expenses.¹⁰

The executive had to deal with a whole range of issues on top of the

issue of settlement locations. Norris' response to all these issues, and the Metis' agitation regarding them, revealed a preoccupation with democratic organization which would characterize his political life. Days after the founding convention Norris tested out the executive about the strength of their mandate and the need for further consultation with the rank and file. The executive had been elected for one year and a general convention was not required until then. Despite this the executive decided to hold another general gathering of the Metis, called the Second Annual Convention, just seven months later.

Norris and Brady considered the general assemblies critical. Years of isolation and voluntary retreat had removed many Metis and former treaty Indians from any effective participation in Canadian political life, and the machinations of politicians in search of the Metis' vote had created a suspicion of politics. The traditional hunters and trappers of the bush were highly individualistic and had no tradition of liberal democratic leadership. Those Metis who had shared in that tradition had gradually lost it after years of racist and social disruption. Many Metis settlements were virtually immobilized by poverty, malnutrition and disease—conditions which made democratic action nearly impossible. It was due to this combination of factors that many Metis developed the practice of turning for leadership to someone with influence in the dominant society, someone educated in the political process. This reliance on white outsiders would hamper democratic action by the Metis. Brady and Norris hoped to change this attitude by maximum use of general assemblies.

The second annual convention was held at Lac Ste. Anne on July 25, 1933. It coincided with the annual pilgrimage to the Catholic mission there,¹¹ and the site and date were chosen because of this. In the movement's early stages the Catholic clergy ignored the association and its efforts on behalf of the Metis people. Neither supporting nor opposing the movement, the clergy, as it had in the past, was assessing the situation before playing its hand. Norris and Brady probably hoped the clergy would be prevented from intervening by the moral strength of the Metis' demands.

The annual pilgrimage to Lac Ste. Anne was the largest yearly gathering of Indian and Metis people in Alberta. It was not uncommon for 4,000 native people and a smaller number of whites to gather on the well-kept grounds of the mission. Hundreds of tents and wagons covered the mission, and people arrived by train, car, wagon and on foot.¹²

The convention lasted only one day and served as a sounding board and a renewal of the executive's mandate to negotiate with the government. No elections took place as the executive had been elected to their posts for one year at the founding convention six months

earlier.

Brady did not attend the Lac Ste. Anne convention. While the reasons for this are not clear it was the first sign of Brady's sometimes eccentric behavior; a preference for solitude that was often interpreted as indifference. Norris wrote to him a week later, mildly chastising him.

The meeting revealed the importance of former treaty Indians in the association. Several treaty Indian leaders spoke to the convention in support of the association and its aims. Among them was one of the most prominent and popular Cree leaders in the province, Johnny Callihoo. Callihoo, a socialist colleague of Norris, was actively supporting the association, in part by driving Norris around the province on organizing campaigns.¹³

Most resolutions addressed the choice of locations for the settlement lands. The convention urged the government to investigate lands recommended by the association and proposed that two executive members, Dion and Norris, be involved in any such investigation. Several areas were identified as being particularly desirable. However, while the long-term aims of the association focussed on agricultural settlement, some short-term concerns reflected the semi-nomadic mode of life of many members. The government, in an effort to regulate trapping and implement conservation measures, was planning to register trap lines. This would involve establishing firm boundaries on trap lines, something the trappers considered an encroachment on their traditional trapping pattern. A motion opposing registration was passed. Finally, the convention dealt with the constitution. The convention decided that the draft document, prepared by Brady, be widely circulated for discussion and revision.¹⁴

Around this time officials of the provincial Department of Lands and Mines informed Norris and Dion that an immediate land investigation, as suggested by the association, would probably be approved. Despite the premier's public position, they were told that the province believed the federal government had no responsibility for the Metis and that the transfer of land to the province also transferred responsibility for outstanding Metis scrip. Norris reported to Brady that Ottawa might, in the province's opinion, still have a moral obligation of some kind.

The autumn of 1933 demonstrated the movement's growing organizational strengths. Some 833 questionnaires had been completed with a goal of 1,000 easily within reach. The Grouard district was now even better organized than St. Paul, reported Norris, teasing Brady, whose area had been the strongest. Norris had attended several meetings in the Grouard district and was obviously delighted with the response. He wrote to Brady:

We held three meetings all crowded to hall capacity and the

cheers to our talk would lift a ceiling. These people are in poor circumstances in comparison to most of our districts but have absolutely put to shame every other district to date in all respects.

Government hints of immediate investigation of lands and the possibility of a commission of enquiry plus the enthusiasm of the Grouard Metis left Norris optimistic about the movement's success. His letter continued:

Jimmy, I think we have the government in a position where they are at a loss as to how to act. . . At first, I have been told, our movement was only considered [by the government] as a flash in the pan but believe me we have them, the Powers that be, on the alert now and guessing.¹⁵

Norris, the inveterate organization man, had only one concern—the maintenance of Metis unity. He expressed to Brady the dangers of differences of opinion regarding the choice of settlement sites: “we must not give the authorities the least sign of discord among ourselves.” In another letter he continued the same theme and alluded to the risk to unity of his and Brady's socialist convictions.

I have warned all councillors to lay low. We are a non-political organization. A large vicious dog ready to spring and bite. . . For this reason we are a puzzle to different ones and, Jimmy, for Christ Sake, don't give our hand away. We are now where we can demand and be assured absolutely of attaining our objectives. . . and when necessary and expedient we must all act as one man. All councillors with whom I have kept in constant touch are waiting instructions. Till then they have all sworn to remain united.¹⁶

Besides being the guardian of Metis unity, Norris, in the summer and fall of 1933, was active as political catalyst within the executive. Both Dion and Brady apparently needed encouragement to keep them active, and he pleaded with his fellow executives to carry on. He believed the battle was about to be concluded and urged Brady to: “put your heart and soul into the Metis question for the next sixty days and we will have them beat.”

In September Norris and Dion met with the government—this time with acting Premier G. Hoadley, the minister of lands and mines, R.G. Reid, and his deputy, Mr. Harvie. This meeting further convinced Norris that there would be an announcement “any day” about a commission.

Norris' hopes turned out to be ill founded. The province began to

hedge. The reasons for this were probably related, in part, to the question of federal responsibility for the Metis. While little had been revealed officially to the association, the provincial government had been studying the situation. Harvie had submitted two reports to Reid, with findings and recommendations based partly on the Metis questionnaires. The prospects for the Metis, said the reports, were extremely poor: "The future of the half-breed in the province is one that must be viewed with grave concern if anything worthwhile is to be accomplished at even this late date."¹⁷ Harvie made two general recommendations; first, that the government set aside reserves of land for the Metis, with title remaining with the government; secondly, that matters relating to the "future welfare" of the Half Breed population were matters of "policy" and not "administration." He therefore could not investigate the matter further and suggested that the government establish a Royal Commission to study the whole issue.

Contrary to the impression left with Norris, Harvie also suggested that some responsibility might still rest with the federal government. This almost certainly caused the government to procrastinate on the issue. It was desirable, both politically and financially, to put some of the responsibility on Ottawa as the settlement scheme would be a major undertaking. But this was probably not the only factor in the government's indecision. The UFA government was struggling with its major constituency, the farmers. The once radically democratic UFA had long since petrified into a "government by cabinet." It was no longer able or willing to respond to radical demands of farmers made destitute by the depression. In short, the UFA was fighting for its life. The life and death decisions involved farmers, not Metis.

The government's procrastination prompted Norris to suggest a change in tactics. Predicting the defeat of the UFA in the next election, Norris advised Brady that the Liberals would win and that Brady should support Dechene, the St. Paul Liberal, in the election. Norris apparently had concluded that the government had shelved the question, and he did not share Brady's opinion that the constitutional route was the back-up strategy. "We are in rather a precarious position being a non-political organization."¹⁸ Norris, in favoring the electoral strategy, was clearly influenced by the Liberal record on the Metis issue, and suggested in a second letter to Brady that "the Association should favor the Liberals [because of] the splendid work done by some of our Liberal MLAs."¹⁹

Brady did not change strategy. While there is no record of his reply to Norris,* Brady evidently believed that the government was stalling.

*Unfortunately, Brady's correspondence to Norris during the thirties and early forties has not survived.