

Alexander Kennedy Isbister: Metis Lawyer (1822-1883)

Isbister, also known by his Indian name Koonaubay, was born at Cumberland House in 1822. His father was Thomas Isbister an Orcadian clerk at that post, his mother was a Metis, Mary Kennedy, sister to Captain William Kennedy.

As a youth, Alexander traveled to the Orkney Islands to receive his basic education, he returned to the Red River District in 1833. He attended St. John's School, then in 1838 joined the ranks of the Hudson's Bay Company. For three years, he worked up north, quitting the Company to further his studies. He enrolled at the University of Edinburgh (M.A.) and then University of London (LL.B.). He became a teacher in London, and at the same time wrote many school texts. In 1872, he was appointed Dean of a teacher training college in London. He was also editor of the *Education Times*, for twenty years. His scientific contributions in the area of geology include "On the Geology of the Hudson's Bay Territories and of Portions of the Arctic and North-Western Regions of America," which appeared in the Quarterly Journal of the Geological Society of London in 1855.



As an active lawyer and diplomat, Alexander Kennedy Isbister is best known for his solid defense of the rights of Rupert's Land's Indigenous residents against the policies of the Hudson's Bay Company both at the Imperial Parliament at Westminster and at the Company's London headquarters. Unfortunately, for the Metis, and the Company, the Imperial government did not heed Isbister's warning that the original residents of the North-West should have a say in how they were governed. His reason and eloquence failed to achieve Metis self-government. Nonetheless, his achievements were considerable.

Isbister's concern for education at Red River was demonstrated by the 1867 endowment of a prize to be won in open competition between the scholars from the common schools in Red River.

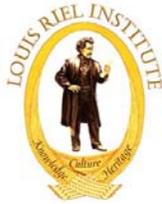
On his death in 1883, Isbister left the bulk of his large fortune to the newly formed University of Manitoba. Eighty-five thousand dollars was a great deal of money in 1883, over a million in today's terms. Up until the 1920s, this was still the largest bequest to the university, the remainder of its trust funds were made up of money derived from sales of agricultural land. The interest was to be used to award scholarships to promising students regardless of race, creed, or sex. Isbister also donated his personal library, of over 4,000 books, to the University and this was the start of the present library of over 1,000,000 books.

In 1932, officials discovered that the chairman of the Board of Governors of the University had embezzled a million dollars of the University money, including all the money in the A.K. Isbister Scholarship Fund. The Manitoba government still gives

“Isbister Scholarships” to outstanding students entering the University. Also, in 1961, a classroom building on campus was named the “Isbister Building” in his honour. Thus, the memory of the University of Manitoba’s first benefactor lives on in a special way for which all Metis can be proud.

References

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- Van Kirk, Sylvia. “Alexander Kennedy Isbister.” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. XI (1881-1890). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982: 445-446.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute