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457 Main Street,  
Winnipeg, MB R3B 3E8

January 10, 1997

Senator John Boucher,  
National Métis Senate Constitutional Commission



Cher Monsieur Boucher,

Subject: James Isbister Commemoration

I am writing to you on behalf of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to request your support for the commemoration of James Isbister, Métis leader and actual founder of Prince Albert. Ms. Doreen Isbister of the James Isbister Memorial Foundation has advised that she has already spoken to you on the matter.

I am forwarding a copy of Agenda Paper on James Isbister prepared for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) and presented at their November, 1996 meeting. The submission has the enthusiastic support of Professor André Lalonde of the University of Regina, the Saskatchewan Board Member. Although response by the Board in general was very favourable, we would like to ensure that the Métis community supports this commemoration.

Métis leaders such as Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont have already been commemorated so it would be fitting that Isbister's contributions to Canadian history be acknowledged as well. You may also wish to note that a biography of Isbister will also be included in the upcoming Volume XIV of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.

If you have any questions, I can be reached by telephone at (204) 983-2915 and by fax at (204) 983-8187.

Je vous remercie de votre appui et je garde de bons souvenirs de nos rencontres à Batoche et dans les environs. J'ai récemment trouver des documents intéressants au sujet de Sr St-Marcien (Emma Boucher) et de sa soeur Caroline qui avait aussi fait son noviciat chez les Soeurs Grise à St-Boniface.

Sincèrement,

*Jan 3  
old.*

Diane P. Payment  
historienne



Mr. Diane Payment, Historian  
Prairie and Northern Region  
Environment Canada Parks  
457 Main Street  
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 3E8

February 26, 1997

**RE: (1) THANK YOU FOR YOUR LETTER AND FOR YOUR VALUED  
RESEARCH ON THE JAMES ISBISTER COMMEMORATION;  
(2) TO PLEDGE MY SUPPORT FOR THE  
JAMES ISBISTER COMMEMORATION**

Dear Ms. Payment:

Thank you for your letter and information dated January 10, 1997. Please rest assured that I, Senator John B. Boucher (of the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan and of the Metis National Council), acknowledge and appreciate the important, revisionist research surrounding the historical role of Mr. James Isbister, the actual founder of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. Further, I support fully the James Isbister Commemoration and I hereby recognize the fine research and extra effort expended by both yourself and Ms. Doreen Isbister and the James Isbister Memorial Foundation.

Upon review of the "Agenda Paper" enclosed with your letter, I was happy to learn that your research and written report mirrors closely the "oral history" on the subject that I have heard and understood over the years.

Thank you to both yourself and to Ms. Doreen Isbister for taking these initial steps in the recreation of the corrected historical perspective of the Metis people's rightful place in the past, present and future of our great country. Such work is important for so many reasons, not least of which is the recognition and perpetuation of the Metis people's perception of pride in their history and for their positive accomplishments in the founding and forging of our country... for the countless achievements attained by the Metis Nation but that have always been denied us--individually and as an aboriginal people--by the Dominion of Canada.

Keep up the valuable and important research work. I am pleased to see that James Isbister is finally being recognized and acknowledged for his positive contributions to Canadian history. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

John B. Boucher, Provincial and National Metis Senator (MNS and MNC)



# HISTORIC SITES AND MONUMENTS BOARD OF CANADA

## AGENDA PAPER

**TITLE:** James Isbister

**SOURCE:** David Smyth  
Historical Services Branch

**1996-52**

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### INTRODUCTION

James Isbister (1833-1915) was a leader of his people, the English Métis, during a time of stressful transition, followed by one of great crisis. He led the defence of Métis land and political rights in the West from the late 1870s through the early 1880s. He helped to bridge the long-standing gap between the English and French Métis in their struggle for redress of their shared grievances with the Government of Canada. He was one of four delegates, the only English one, sent to Montana by the Métis to seek Louis Riel's assistance with their movement in the spring of 1884. From that time, until the outbreak in March 1885 of armed resistance, in which he took no part, Isbister was one of Riel's most militant and active supporters in the "constitutional agitation" aimed at alleviating the situation of the French and English Métis of the Saskatchewan. In large measure it was Isbister who helped unite these two peoples into concerted action in support of a mutual cause. Today, though the Métis people are certainly not a homogeneous entity, the past divisive issues of ethnic origin, language and religion have been submerged in the over-riding unity of a single identity, that of the Métis nation. The roots of this single nationhood may be traced back to the cooperative actions in the mid-1880s of Louis Riel, James Isbister, their colleagues in leadership and their myriad supporters.

James Isbister, an Aboriginal person, was the actual founder of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, in 1862, though credit was soon after given and is generally now still given to the Reverend James Nisbet, a White person, who established a mission in 1866 close by Isbister's well-established farm, then known as the Isbister Settlement. Both before and after establishing himself and his family on their farm on the lower North Saskatchewan River, Isbister had a successful career with the Hudson's Bay Company, from 1853 to 1871, broken by two brief periods of retirement from its employ. Throughout his life, he was a devout member of the Church of England (Anglican Church), who took an

active part in his local church and in diocesan affairs. He was a lay reader and a teacher, who taught throughout the Prince Albert region, especially among Native children on local reserves.

In November 1995 Doreen Isbister, the great grandniece of James Isbister, wrote to Dr. André Lalonde on behalf of the James Isbister Memorial Fund. Dr. Lalonde then brought Isbister to the Board Secretariat's attention, the result of which is this paper. Ms. Isbister, who has conducted a great deal of research on her great granduncle, has been most generous in her advice and with her research materials, both of which have been graciously shared with this author, who would here like to express his gratitude for her kind assistance. The author would also like to express his appreciation to two colleagues, David Lee and Diane Payment, without whose help this paper would have been much less than it is and than its subject, James Isbister, surely warranted. Ms. Payment's contribution was especially above and beyond the call of collegial duty.

## HISTORY

### Historiography

The historiography of the English Métis of the Saskatchewan is virtually non-existent. John Foster has done some early work on their origins and movement from Hudson Bay to the Red River (Winnipeg) area.<sup>1</sup> Bob Coutts has also done some detailed studies of English Métis in Red River, the implications of which tie directly to this paper.<sup>2</sup> But, nothing has been published on the English Métis of Prince Albert in particular nor the forks of the Saskatchewan in general. The focus of Saskatchewan Métis studies, of which the volume of work is enormous, has been the French Métis. This is perhaps understandable, as it was the relationship between the French Métis and the Canadian Government that was most visibly confrontational and which resulted in two brief periods of armed resistance led by the French Métis, 1869-1870 and 1885. This comparative lack of work on the English Métis provides little context for an evaluation of the contribution of James Isbister. However, the author will try to develop a context in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> John E. Foster, "The Origins of the Mixed Bloods in the Canadian West," in Lewis H. Thomas, ed., Essays on Western History (Edmonton, 1976), 69-80.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see: Robert Coutts, "The Role of Agriculture in an English Speaking Halfbreed Economy: The Case of St. Andrew's, Red River," Native Studies Review 4, nos. 1 and 2 (1988): 67-94; and, "Anglican Missionaries as Agents of Acculturation: The Church Missionary Society at St. Andrew's, Red River, 1830-1870," in Barry Ferguson, ed., The Anglican Church and the World of Western Canada, 1820-1970 (Regina, 1991), 50-60.

## Definitions and Terminology

Today James Isbister, whose father was a Scot and whose mother was an English Métis, is clearly recognized as a Métis, both by his descendants and by the Métis National Council.<sup>3</sup> However, at the time in which he lived the identification of his ethnicity was not so certain. He was likely most often referred to as a "halfbreed," an "English halfbreed" or an "English native," not as a Métis, a term which then was virtually exclusively used to identify people of mixed French and Indian ancestry. The French word métis simply means mixed, and refers to people of mixed ethnic origin, specifically in the 19th century to people in the British North American West of French and Indian descent.<sup>4</sup>

In the 19th century the French and English Métis were considered by outside observers to be two separate ethnic groups, who were labelled by these outsiders most often as "English halfbreeds" and "French halfbreeds." For decades scholars have used separate terms to distinguish between the two, Métis sufficing to cover those of French origin and names such as mixed-blood or Native English to identify those of English descent.<sup>5</sup> The Métis nation rejects the use of any term such as mixed-blood or halfbreed to describe it or any of its people; besides carrying highly pejorative baggage, these terms lack specificity, and could be applied to any number of people whose ethnic ancestry was mixed. In 1982 the Métis National Council defined the nation which it represented. "The Métis Nation comprises self-identifying descendants of the historic Métis who evolved in what is now western Canada as a distinct aboriginal people with a common political will and other persons of aboriginal descent who identify themselves as Métis and are accepted by the Métis community."<sup>6</sup> In the 1982 amendments to the Constitution of Canada, Section 35, the Métis were one of three groups, along

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<sup>3</sup> Discussion of author with Gerald Morin, President of the Métis National Council, 20 June 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Peterson and Brown, in Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, eds., The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America (Winnipeg, 1985), 5.

<sup>5</sup> As Douglas Sprague has pointed out, in the first census reports of Red River, the term "Native" was used to distinguish the English Métis from the French, while in correspondence of the first half of the 19th century "Native English" was used "to distinguish the 'English half breeds' from the 'French Métis'." Sprague himself adopted the "Native English" usage. D.N. Sprague, Canada and the Métis, 1869-1885 (Waterloo, 1988), 21n.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Paul L.A.H. Chartrand, "'Terms of Division': Problems of 'Outside-Naming' for Aboriginal People in Canada," Journal of Indigenous Studies 2, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 14.

with Indian and Inuit peoples, to be guaranteed Aboriginal rights.<sup>7</sup>

The first Métis people were the direct result of the coming together of European males employed in the fur trade and of Indian women, most often Cree and Saukteaux. Though some Métis children were the result of short-term relationships, many, if not most, were the offspring of long-term, stable unions. Hudson's Bay Company, North West Company and other fur trade company employees were often married to Indian women "à la façon du pays," according to the custom of the country, or, after the first quarter of the 19th century, in official church ceremonies. Later generations of Métis resulted from the uniting of Métis with White, Métis with Indian and Métis with Métis.

However, while today past differences among the Métis are officially downplayed, the single people of the 1990s was almost always considered to be two distinct peoples in the 19th century. The "Métis" of the 19th century were virtually universally defined as being of French-Indian origin, Roman Catholic and French-speaking. Their White parentage was almost exclusively the male employees and officers of the North West Company. "Mixed-bloods," "Native English" or "halfbreeds" were viewed as a distinct ethnic group, of British-Indian ancestry, Protestant and English-speaking. Their White parentage was principally the Scottish and, to some extent, English servants of the Hudson's Bay Company. Today, most historians specializing in Métis studies are firm in distinguishing between the history and identity of these two French and English ethnic groups of the Canadian West.<sup>8</sup> However, as David Lee argued, precise definitions do not always hold, for a large number of the "French" Métis of the 1870s to 1890s were apparently unilingual Cree, many of whom took part in the North-West Rebellion, or Resistance, of 1885.<sup>9</sup>

Among the Métis of today past differences of language, culture and European ancestry have shrunk, if not to insignificance, at least enough to be subsumed by an overall Métis identity. Most

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>8</sup> Diane Paulette Payment, "The Free People - Otipemisiwak": Batoche, Saskatchewan, 1870-1930 (Ottawa, 1990), 19-20, and, P.R. Mailhot and D.N. Sprague, "Persistent Settlers: The Dispersal and Resettlement of the Red River Métis, 1870-1885," Canadian Ethnic Studies 17, no. 2 (1985): 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> David Lee, "The Métis Militant Rebels of 1885," in R. Douglas Francis and Donald B. Smith, eds., Readings in Canadian History: Post-Confederation (Toronto, 1994), 93. Payment suggested that many of these supposedly unilingual Cree Métis actually spoke Michif, a mixture of French and Cree, but that they were not completely fluent in French. Personal communication to author of 24 September 1996.

Métis are now English-speaking.<sup>10</sup> Similarities, not differences, have come to unite a people. Perhaps in some measure the events leading up to the North-West Rebellion helped to bring the French and English Métis together, despite the fact that almost no English "halfbreeds" took part in the armed resistance. Until the resort to arms in early 1885 the two communities on the Saskatchewan were working together towards a common goal. And, James Isbister, an ardent ally and supporter of Louis Riel until the armed resistance occurred, was one of the leaders of his people in this unifying struggle. In recognition of both this shared heritage and present single national identity, the author has chosen to use the term Métis to include the "English halfbreeds," as well as the French, though such usage would have been out of place in the 19th century. It is not widely accepted by scholars today either, who prefer to maintain the perhaps then-appropriate ethnic distinctions and labels.

### Early Life and Hudson's Bay Company Career

Isbister is a long-established and widespread name throughout the Canadian West. Isbisters from the Orkney Islands had come to Rupert's Land, the Hudson's Bay Company's chartered territories in British North America, from at least the 1730s.<sup>11</sup> Some formed long-term associations with Native women, either Indian or Métis, and had families with them.<sup>12</sup> The offspring of one of these marriages was James Isbister.

James Isbister was born on 29 November 1833 in the Nelson River District, likely at Oxford House, where his father was then posted. He was the third child of 13 to be born to John Isbister and Frances "Fanny" Isbister (née Sinclair). John was from the Orkneys, off the northern coast of Scotland. He joined the Hudson's Bay Company in 1817 as a Labourer. He remained with the Company until 1859, retiring with the rank of Interpreter and

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<sup>10</sup> Discussion of author with Gerald Morin, 20 June 1996.

<sup>11</sup> Provincial Archives of Manitoba, Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), Search Files, James Isbister "F".

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the most well-known Métis Isbister, especially in Manitoba, is James' cousin, Alexander Kennedy Isbister (1822-1883), who led a remarkable life in London as an educational reformer and a critic of the Hudson's Bay Company. See: Sylvia M. Van Kirk, "Alexander Kennedy Isbister," in, The Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Volume XI, 1881 to 1890 (Toronto, 1982), 445-6; and, Barry Cooper, "Alexander Kennedy Isbister, a Respectable Victorian," Canadian Ethnic Studies 17, no. 2 (1985): 44-63. Over the years there were no fewer than six different James Isbisters employed by the Hudson's Bay Company, the cause of some confusion among early researchers and some trepidation even today among others. Letter of 22 May 1996 to author from Anne Morton, Head of Research and Reference, HBCA.

Postmaster. He was still alive in 1883, at age 88.<sup>13</sup> There is some question about Fanny Sinclair's family. Hudson's Bay Company Archives records seem to indicate that she was the Indian daughter of the Cree chief, Aissayseepean.<sup>14</sup> However, in scrip applications made in the 1880s by James and three of his brothers, their mother is identified as Métis, not Cree.<sup>15</sup> She was born about 1813 in the Red River area and died on 13 December 1879 at Winnipeg.<sup>16</sup>

James was well educated, perhaps in a school at the Red River Settlement. Documents in his own hand attest to his good education. He was also multilingual, apparently able to speak fluent English, Cree, Chippewyan, Gaelic and Michif.<sup>17</sup> Michif, rarely spoken now, is primarily a mixture of Cree and French.<sup>18</sup>

James Isbister's natural abilities and fine education would stand him in good stead throughout his life, but they would not be sufficient to overcome completely the racial barriers built into the Hudson's Bay Company's hierarchical structure from the 1820s, nor to compensate for his "humble" origins. When he joined the Hudson's Bay Company in 1853 there was little chance of his advancing to the upper echelons of the Company's North American operations, to leave the servant class and to enter the officer or gentleman class. By the mid-1820s, as Jennifer Brown stated, "it was clear that one major criterion used in judging employees was race."<sup>19</sup> While previously the Métis children of White fur trade company officers could themselves aspire to the rank of Chief Trader or Chief Factor, under the auspices of Governor George Simpson, their realistic expectations were severely

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<sup>13</sup> HBCA, Search Files, John Isbister "A".

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> National Archives of Canada (NAC), RG 15, Vol. 1321, Reel C-14929, scrip application of George B. Isbister, and, Vol. 1328, Reel C-14939, scrip applications of Adam Isbister, James Isbister and Robert Isbister.

<sup>16</sup> Glenbow Archives, M7144, Charles Denney Papers, Reel 16, File 670,000, John Isbister File (Glenbow, Denney). This file consists of some 50 unpaginated sheets related to John Isbister's genealogy and family history.

<sup>17</sup> The information about Isbister's facilities with language was provided to Dr. Lalonde by Ms. Doreen Isbister of the James Isbister Memorial Fund (hereafter cited as Memorial Fund, Package). Some of the material in the information package was prepared by Diane Payment of Parks Canada, Winnipeg.

<sup>18</sup> John C. Crawford, "What is Michif?: Language in the Métis Tradition," in, Peterson and Brown, eds., The New Peoples, 231-41.

<sup>19</sup> Jennifer S.H. Brown, Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country (Vancouver, 1980), 206.

limited by a not-so-transparent glass ceiling. No matter how gifted or well educated they might be, Simpson did not want the Métis children of company officers mingling socially, or in the power structure of the Company, with the Eurocanadian officers.<sup>20</sup> The position of Postmaster, lower in rank, status and pay than that of Clerk, the training ground for company officers, was specifically created to accommodate/exploit gifted Métis servants. However, by the 1850s and 1860s there was renewed hope for advancement within the Company for the Métis children of company officers.<sup>21</sup> Many English Métis children of company officers did in turn become officers in the Company in the 1850s and 1860s. However, James' career in the Hudson's Bay Company would be hampered by his Métis origins, but even more so by the fact that his White father had himself never risen above the rank of Postmaster, therefore affording him little or no influence to assist in his son's advancement through the ranks. Without that "political" influence, even with a slightly more enlightened company view toward race, James had virtually no chance of rising higher in the Company than he eventually did, to the rank of Clerk. The only Métis to make it into the officer class of the Hudson's Bay Company after 1850 were the children of prominent White company officers.<sup>22</sup>

James Isbister signed a three-year contract as a Labourer with the Hudson's Bay Company at Norway House on 4 August 1853, for an annual salary of £20, both the position and the salary being the lowest offered by the Company.<sup>23</sup> His first posting was in the Cumberland District. The Company's Northern Department, its territory west of the Great Lakes and of Hudson Bay, was divided administratively into several districts, with fluctuating and flexible borders. Isbister spent his entire career in two of these, the Cumberland and Saskatchewan districts. The Cumberland District centred on the lower reaches of the Saskatchewan River and on Cedar Lake. The Saskatchewan District, immediately west of Cumberland, extended from below the forks of the Saskatchewan River to the Rockies. The bulk of Isbister's fur trade career was spent in the area encompassing Cumberland House and the forks of the North and South Saskatchewan rivers, the latter locality being the place where he eventually settled and spent the remainder of his life.

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<sup>20</sup> HBCA, D.4/22, Norway House, 22 June 1836, Simpson to John Peter Pruden, fols. 22d.-23.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, Strangers, 205-11, and, Philip Goldring, Papers on the Labour System of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-1900, Volume II. Manuscript Report Series, No. 412 (Ottawa, Parks Canada, 1980), 46-57.

<sup>22</sup> Goldring, Papers, 52-3.

<sup>23</sup> HBCA, Search Files, James Isbister "F", and, HBCA, B.49/d/77, fols. 18d.-19.

The author was able to trace Isbister's precise whereabouts for virtually every summer and winter season of his career with the Hudson's Bay Company. Though only part of one summer journal has survived for any post at the time of Isbister's residence,<sup>24</sup> it was possible to locate him through the Company's extensive archives.<sup>25</sup> However, it would take several pages just to reproduce a chronology of his postings for these 18 years, and the author will not do so here; it would add little to the Board's understanding of his life and its significance.

Isbister climbed steadily up the company ladder from its lowest rung. In a series of short-term contracts he achieved the following promotions: 1856, Interpreter, at £25 per annum; 1859, Postmaster at £40; 1864, Postmaster, at £60; 1868, Clerk, probably at £100 per year. During this period he also briefly retired from the Company on two occasions, 1862-1864 and 1867-1868. In 1862 he established a farm at the future site of Prince Albert, which he and his wife maintained steadily, even while he was employed by the Company. His career with the Hudson's Bay Company was unremarkable. On many occasions he was given charge of small outposts during the winter season, and of larger posts during the summer, when most company officers had left the districts with brigades carrying the returns of the year's trade down to Hudson Bay.

On 1 June 1871 James Isbister retired for the last time from the Hudson's Bay Company. He had probably reached the highest position possible for him, considering both his ethnic background and the low company rank of his European father. Yet one is left with the definite impression that company service was not where his heart lay. The Company readily accepted him back after his earlier retirements, if not actually inviting him to return. However, the two periods of temporary retirement from the Hudson's Bay Company, and his on-going farming activity from 1862, clearly indicate that employment with the Company was not a life-long career ambition, abruptly terminated, but merely a means to an end, a way to establish a sound financial base to permit his becoming a self-employed, independent farmer, in an environment where his ethnic background was not an issue, let alone an encumbrance.

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<sup>24</sup> HBCA, B.2/a/2, Fort à la Corne post journal, 1 June 1855 to 31 October 1855. Isbister himself kept this official company journal, but, unfortunately, the pages containing the entries for 4 June to 27 October are missing.

<sup>25</sup> The author's primary sources of information in the HBCA concerning Isbister, besides the already-noted Search File, were: the account books of Edmonton House, the headquarters of the Saskatchewan District (B.60/d/\_); the Cumberland House account books (B.49/d/\_); the servants lists of the Northern Department (B.239/f/\_); and, the minutes of the annual councils of the Northern Department (B.239/k/3).

## Farmer and Landholder

On 1 January 1859, James Isbister married Margaret Bear, the daughter of two Métis parents, William Bear, a Hudson's Bay Company servant, and his wife, Margaret Bear (née Tate).<sup>26</sup> James and Margaret were married by the Reverend Henry Budd at "Nepowewin Station," (present-day Nipawin) near Fort à la Corne, below the forks of the Saskatchewan rivers.<sup>27</sup> Within two and one half years they were the first residents at what became Prince Albert. On 3 June 1862 they settled on River Lot 62, and started to farm the land.<sup>28</sup> Their farm was located on the south shore of the North Saskatchewan River, about midway between Carlton House and the forks.

James used a flexible economic strategy to maintain himself and his family; he did not rely solely on the products of his farm, but on the fruits of his labour off the farm as well. He availed himself of a variety of income sources to sustain himself and his family. This mixed employment was essential to his retention of their farm. It was a survival strategy employed by many other Métis, which enabled them to hold onto their land. It must have been a demanding life in those years before 1871, when James tried to maintain his farm while in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company; much of the burden surely fell on his wife Margaret. Together they kept their farm. They were persistent settlers.<sup>29</sup> In 1878 a survey was completed of existing land holdings at Prince Albert, and River Lot 62 was still in the possession of James Isbister.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Glenbow, Denney, and, NAC, RG 15, Vol. 1335, Reel C-14947, scrip application of James Bear, Margaret's brother, for the heirs of their deceased father, William.

<sup>27</sup> Photocopies of the page of the marriage register were kindly provided to the author by both Ms. Doreen Isbister and Professor Donald Smith.

<sup>28</sup> E.K. Matheson, "The Church of England among the English Speaking Settlers in the Diocese of Saskatchewan in the Earlier Years of the Diocese," Canadian North-West Historical Society Publications 1, no. 3 (1927): 38; Gary William David Abrams, Prince Albert: The First Century, 1866-1966 (Saskatoon, 1966), 1-2; and, Glenbow, Denney.

<sup>29</sup> This term was used by Mailhot and Sprague to describe the French Métis who had earlier settled in Manitoba and then again on the Saskatchewan. It is a term which is equally applicable to Isbister. Mailhot and Sprague, "Persistent Settlers."

<sup>30</sup> H.E. Ross narrative, in, Manon Lamontagne, et.al., eds., The Voice of the People: Reminiscences of the Prince Albert Settlement's Early Citizens, 1866-1895 (Prince Albert, 1985), 105. This official plan was approved in Ottawa in February 1879.

By 1885 the Isbisters had prospered at Prince Albert. They had also had 16 children during the first 26 years of their marriage, eight of whom were then still living.<sup>31</sup> The James Isbister family clearly demonstrates the importance of kinship in Métis social life and settlement patterns. In the mid-1880s, besides their own children, many of James and Margaret's siblings were residing at or near Prince Albert, including three of James' brothers and a sister and two brothers of Margaret's, as well as their families.<sup>32</sup>

The problem of James Isbister's land holdings at Prince Albert is a bit of a sticky one. Questions of which lots he owned, and when, have arisen in the past. Virtually the only reliable source of information on this issue, besides the 1885 Isbister scrip application noted above, is the Homestead Records held at the Saskatchewan Archives Board, in Saskatoon.<sup>33</sup> As stated above, James and his family were still on their original land holdings of 160 acres, River Lot 62, in 1878. However, James may also have been farming from the mid-1870s on River Lot 16. His chief crop was hay, with some wheat. In 1875 he had ploughed only three acres for crops, but steadily increased his developed acres to 16, ploughed and fenced. In the early 1880s he sold both pieces of land, but, however, not before acquiring yet another, Lot 17, in August 1883. He still held title to this last piece of land as late as 1907. In May 1888, James stated that he, his wife and nine children were living on the 160-acre farm, Lot 17, which contained a small house, a stable and a storehouse. He then had 60 acres "under crop," and had only four

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<sup>31</sup> NAC, RG 15, Vol. 1328, Reel C-14939, scrip application of James Isbister, 22 July 1885, and, Glenbow, Denney.

<sup>32</sup> This information is to be found in two groups of records in the NAC, RG 15, Department of the Interior. These are the records of the Half-Breed Claims Commission and those of the Royal Commission on Rebellion Losses. In the first set, see: Vol. 1328, Reel C-14939, applications of Adam and Robert Miles Isbister; and, Vol. 1335, Reel C-14947, applications of Henry, James and Nancy Bear. In the second set of records, see: Vol. 915, Claim No. 37, Robert Miles Isbister; Vol. 920, Claim No. 291, Adam Isbister; and, Vol. 922, Claim No. 371, George B. Isbister.

<sup>33</sup> Unable to visit this repository in person, the author has had to rely on the willing support of the staff of that institution, and once again the research of Ms. Doreen Isbister, to try to sort out this matter. Ms. Isbister kindly lent this author photocopies of relevant Homestead records which she had acquired from the Saskatchewan Archives Board. That institution also sent copies of Isbister-related Homestead files to the author. The information provided in the next part of the paper is taken from the Saskatchewan Archives Board, Homestead Records, Files 61409, 73871 and 503265.

horses and 13 head of cattle, a little less than his usual holdings in livestock.<sup>34</sup>

Just as his English Métis brethren had done before him at St. Andrew's Parish at Red River, Isbister relied on varied employment, not simply subsistence farming. Bob Coutts has described the economic strategy of the English Métis at Red River who combined "agriculture with hunting, freighting for the Hudson's Bay Company and other commercial pursuits."<sup>35</sup> This description fits Isbister's strategy to a T. New opportunities existed in the region since the Hudson's Bay Company in the early 1860s had switched from boat brigades to Red River Carts to carry its outfits inland in its southern districts in the West. Contracted freighters were quickly replacing company servants in the transportation system. Isbister carried freight on contract for the Hudson's Bay Company after 1871.<sup>36</sup>

The presence of the federal government also offered alternate sources of income. The John Smith Reserve, created as the result of Treaty No. 6 in 1876, was located only about 20 kilometres south of Prince Albert, on the South Saskatchewan River. Isbister had a double connection to this particular reserve. Not only had the Church Missionary Society of the Church of England established a school there in 1878, but many of Margaret Isbister's relatives apparently lived on the reserve.<sup>37</sup> The John Smith Reserve definitely became a source of income to Isbister, and it likely was also the centre, outside of Prince Albert itself, of his lay teaching. For several years the reserve contained a government-sponsored farm. In 1879 Isbister, and his brother Adam, each sold seed potatoes to the farm.<sup>38</sup> Three years later James earned wages of \$25.00 as a labourer on the reserve farm and the next year was paid about \$20.00 for threshing wheat

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<sup>34</sup> Saskatchewan Archives Board, Homestead File 503265.

<sup>35</sup> Coutts, "The Role," 68.

<sup>36</sup> NAC, RG 15, Vol. 921, Claim No. 323, 18 May 1886, James Isbister claim to Rebellion Losses Commission.

<sup>37</sup> Canada. Report of the Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs (hereafter cited as Indian Affairs), 1880 (Ottawa, 1881), 90, and, Public Archives of Canada, Maps of Indian Reserves and Settlements in the National Map Collection, Volume II, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories (Ottawa, 1981), 78. Reproduced on this page is an 1884 map of the John Smith, or Muskoday, Reserve (NAC, NMC 8387), which identifies a kind of Métis riverlot system, with three of the lots' occupants being listed as James, Joseph and Philip Bear.

<sup>38</sup> Indian Affairs, 1879, 275. James received \$9.00.

there.<sup>39</sup> Isbister had definitely developed a flexible economic strategy which was well suited to his situation, and which permitted him to retain his land.

### Founder of Prince Albert

For three years after establishing their farm in 1862, James and Margaret were the only settlers in the region, and the place became known as the Isbister Settlement. In 1865 they acquired their first neighbours, a Mr. Oluff Olsen and his wife, who remained but a short time.<sup>40</sup> The following year a Presbyterian minister, the Reverend James Nisbet, and a small party, arrived to establish a mission.

Though Nisbet was not the first settler, he has become widely accredited as the founder of Prince Albert. Both The Canadian Encyclopedia and the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names give Nisbet or his mission recognition as having founded Prince Albert in 1866.<sup>41</sup> This inadvertent denial of recognition of Isbister as the founder of Prince Albert represents two recurring and interrelated problems for historians. These are ethnocentrism and a general lack of documentation of Native achievements. Certainly the records concerning the founding of Prince Albert are scanty, but there is no doubt that James Isbister, and his wife Margaret, were the first residents on the site, while Nisbet was not even the second. A recent history of Prince Albert puts the more general problem of lack of recognition of Native achievement into specific relief.

The first settlement in what is now Prince Albert was started by James Isbister, a Metis trader and interpreter, in June of 1862. (*Prince Albert Daily Herald*, 31 December 1932) It was located just to the east of the present

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<sup>39</sup> Indian Affairs, 1882, 164, and, Indian Affairs, 1883, 164. Starting in 1883, part-time farm labourers were not identified by name in the annual reports, and so there is no way of knowing, at least through printed sources, whether Isbister continued to earn money on the reserve farm to augment his income. Isbister apparently owned his own threshing machine, which he took to the John Smith Reserve, returning to Prince Albert with it in early February 1883. The Prince Albert Times and Saskatchewan Review (7 February 1883), p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Reminiscence of William McDonald, in, Lamontagne, ed., The Voice, 40n.

<sup>41</sup> The Canadian Encyclopedia, vol. 3 (Edmonton, 1988), 1746-7, and, Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, Prince Albert File. This misinformation is understandable as the Permanent Committee relies almost exclusively on already published materials, or submissions of primary research data from outside researchers. As will be seen, even early publications were mistaken about the founding date of Prince Albert and the arrival dates of its first settlers.

penitentiary on River Lot No. 62. Isbister not only built a log house and stable, but was also very likely the first person to grow wheat in the territory.

However, because this initial enterprise was not well documented, credit for the establishment of a permanent settlement at Prince Albert is generally given to the mild-mannered Presbyterian missionary, Reverend James Nisbet.<sup>42</sup>

It was Nisbet who gave the settlement its new name, Prince Albert, after Queen Victoria's husband. By July 1867 Prince Albert still only consisted of the Isbister and Olsen farms, and, about two miles downstream, Nisbet's mission, all of which fall within the present municipal boundaries.<sup>43</sup>

The facts surrounding the founding of Prince Albert were jumbled early on, soon after White settlers, principally from Ontario, came to outnumber and politically dominate the once largely English Métis community of Prince Albert. As early as 1882, perhaps inadvertently, as a result of misinformation, or, deliberately, as a result of racism or ethnocentrism, The Prince Albert Times not only declared Nisbet to be the founder of Prince Albert, in 1866, but reported that neither Isbister nor his first neighbours, the Olsens, arrived there until 1868.<sup>44</sup> Undoubtedly relying on the Times' account, an 1888 directory of the District of Saskatchewan reiterated that all settlement at Prince Albert post-dated the Nisbet mission and specifically stated that Isbister arrived after Nisbet.<sup>45</sup> The naming of Prince Albert after the Queen's consort and the positioning of Nisbet as the town's founder both exemplify a contemporary tendency among White settlers in the West to promote British imperialism and to downplay or to omit altogether the Native origins of their communities.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Brock V. Silversides, Gateway to the North: A Pictorial History of Prince Albert (Saskatoon, 1989), 3.

<sup>43</sup> Reminiscence of William McDonald, in, Lamontagne, ed., The Voice, 40. This first-hand account confirms the Isbister family's continued occupation of River Lot 62, despite the statement made elsewhere that by 1866 "Isbister had moved away, and three families from Red River, two half-breed and one Indian, had taken up farming on the site." Abrams, Prince Albert, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Prince Albert Times (22 November 1882), p.1, col. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Henry Thomas McPhillips' Alphabetical and Business Directory of the District of Saskatchewan, N.W.T. (Qu'Appelle, 1888), 31.

<sup>46</sup> Advice to author from Diane Payment, 24 September 1996.

## In Defence of Métis Rights

By the end of the 1870s, the lack of land surveys had become a critical issue around the forks of the Saskatchewan rivers. The rapid population increase, the problem of lack of clear land title and differing traditions in patterns of settlement all combined to create a strong and on-going sense of grievance with the Canadian Government, both among the English and French Métis and among recent White settlers as well. Land was the key issue in the Canadian West in the 1870s and 1880s. It affected the recent Métis refugees from Manitoba, the long-time Métis and Indian inhabitants of the Saskatchewan, and the increasing numbers of Eurocanadians from Ontario. However, the questions of Métis land title and the land entitlement of recent White settlers, though inextricably intertwined through the lack of government action, were actually two entirely different issues. Whites sought title to their land in the West as homesteaders. The Métis claimed entitlement as indigenous people of the North-West Territories. The fact that neither White settler nor Métis landholder could get redress of their grievances over land from Ottawa provided the basis for concerted, cooperative action, not only between English and French Métis, but also between the Métis and the White settlers.

What made the surveys such a critical issue was the fact that until an official survey had been conducted it was impossible for any individual in the Canadian North-West Territories to gain a patent to the land which he may have actually been occupying continuously for years. No survey meant no secure land title or official ownership of the land. The federal government had devised a plan for a unified survey of the West based on the initial identification of the prime meridians and of base lines. Until these had been surveyed, the land could not be subdivided.

The Métis problem was further exacerbated by the fact that they had a long-standing pattern of individual land use vastly different from the idealized plan of government surveyors. The Métis riverlot system of long, narrow lots permitted each landholder access to water. The plan from Ottawa was for square section lots. Though accommodation of existing settlement patterns was promised, this goal was not always achieved. The situation was made worse, especially for the French Métis, who did not trust the Government, with every justification considering their history in Manitoba, and who often would not cooperate with the surveyors and government land agents with whom they were forced to deal.<sup>17</sup>

After the experience in Manitoba following the Riel Uprising of 1869-1870 and the transfer of Rupert's Land to the Dominion of Canada, the issue of land title was extremely sensitive,

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Payment, "The Free People", 257-69.

potentially explosive, for the Métis. Their first encounter with the Canadian Government and its surveyors was almost entirely negative. Mailhot and Sprague have clearly demonstrated the disentanglement and loss of land which followed the Manitoba surveys for more than one half of French Métis landholders and for more than one third of English Métis landholders in Manitoba.<sup>48</sup> By the late 1870s the dispossession of these Métis landholders in Manitoba was almost complete. Those who had lost title to their land were the people who flocked to the forks of the Saskatchewan to rebuild their lives in English Métis settlements such as Prince Albert and in French Métis settlements such as Batoche and St. Laurent.

The worst fears of the Métis seemed to be becoming reality as the Government remained unresponsive to their many petitions. Once again they felt that their land was threatened, as the Government delayed in granting title. Lack of action in surveying Métis settlements was the single greatest factor in the troubles that lay ahead. In 1885 about 80% of the Métis population of the Northwest were the previously dispossessed and disenfranchised. "The overwhelming majority - nearly 1,000 families distributed in 22 different settlements - was from Manitoba, with the largest concentration of migrants at the forks of the Saskatchewan River, at the Métis colony of St. Laurent and at the native English community of Prince Albert."<sup>49</sup>

Prince Albert had grown rapidly from its simple beginnings as the Isbister Settlement in 1862. By 1874 it consisted of about 50 homes and 300 to 400 residents, most of whom were identified as being "English half-breeds" from Manitoba.<sup>50</sup> Four years later the population had reached a reported 1,000 to 1,200 settlers in and about Prince Albert, these figures certainly reflecting the influx of White settlers, principally from Ontario.<sup>51</sup> Three years later, in 1881, residents of Prince Albert petitioned the federal government for a complete survey of their area as the population had already jumped the banks of the North Saskatchewan River, with people building homes and clearing land on the north shore.<sup>52</sup> The 1878 survey of then-occupied lands at Prince Albert was now totally inadequate to the settlement's current needs.

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<sup>48</sup> Mailhot and Sprague, "Persistent Settlers," 4-5.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>50</sup> Canada. Sessional Papers, Volume 18, 1885 (Ottawa, 1886), Vol 13, Paper 116e (hereafter cited as Sessional Paper 116e), 3.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>52</sup> Canada. Sessional Papers, Volume 18, 1885 (Ottawa, 1886), Vol. 13, Paper 116f (hereafter cited as Sessional Paper 116f), 68.

The situation of the French Métis settlements on the lower South Saskatchewan River was even more chaotic. The settlement of St. Laurent had only been partially surveyed in 1878, after the Prince Albert survey had been finished. The process of completing and finalizing the survey of such settlements as St. Laurent, Batoche and Duck Lake was not even close to being done before 1884.<sup>53</sup>

Though James Isbister had never resided in Manitoba, his sympathies were with and his allegiance was to his people. He became a leader in the movement to gain redress for both English and French Métis grievances over land. There is no doubt of his leadership in the English Métis community in the late 1870s and early 1880s, but it is difficult to place him exactly in the social and political hierarchy of this community which grew up so quickly around his original 1862 farm, and then had a White superstructure imposed on top of it.

His role in the critical years of 1883 to 1885 is a little easier to trace and to understand. Though the documentary record is comparatively scanty, it would appear that James Isbister was the key English Métis leader of his day, both in the struggle for the redress of his people's outstanding grievances and also in uniting, at least temporarily, the previously separate, and often antagonistic, French and English Métis.<sup>54</sup>

It is doubtful that this long-time division among the Métis stemmed from anything other than the influence of an equally divided and contentious White society. Throughout the world in the 19th century, and no less in the Canadian West, virtual battle lines were drawn between Roman Catholic and Protestant, each side proclaiming the light and condemning the misguided, if not doomed, path of the other. In Rupert's Land the two sides were most strongly represented by the Church Missionary Society, of the Church of England, and the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, of the Roman Catholic Church. Each tried to acculturate its Native followers, and in so doing contributed,

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Flanagan, Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered (Saskatoon, 1983), 28-45, and, E.A. Mitchener, "The North Saskatchewan River Settlement Claims, 1883-1884," in, Thomas, ed., Essays, 127-43.

<sup>54</sup> In assisting the author in preparing this paper, Diane Payment, one of the leading experts on the Métis, has come to the conclusion that during the 1884-1885 period Isbister was the most important and influential leader of the English Métis on the Saskatchewan. Personal communication of 19 September 1996.

often quite consciously, to division, and even hostility, between the French and English Métis.<sup>55</sup>

In one of the earliest petitions from the West to the Canadian Government, in February 1878, the key issues were land, surveys and scrip.<sup>56</sup> The 1878 petition was drafted at Prince Albert and signed by dozens of its citizens, including James Isbister.<sup>57</sup> This was among the first of many petitions from English Métis, French Métis and Eurocanadian residents of the West soliciting or demanding that action be taken to alleviate the land issue. As more White settlers arrived, more disputes over ownership developed, though without legal surveys no one's ownership had any real validity in law. As the years passed with no or ineffective and unsatisfactory action the only government response, the Métis petitioners became ever more frustrated and more militant. This was especially the case among the French Métis on the South Saskatchewan, whose pleas had received the least response. Despite their having sent delegations to Ottawa to plead the Métis case, the Government's promises were not kept.<sup>58</sup>

By late 1883 both the French and English Métis and many Eurocanadians had become utterly frustrated with the federal government. Prince Albert's only newspaper, The Prince Albert Times, the Liberal voice of the White settlers, had been leading the call for redress of settlers' land grievances by the Conservative government led by Sir John A. Macdonald. In December 1882 the paper had estimated the region's population at about 5,000 people, now mostly White immigrants from Ontario. It continued the cry for quick action on the land issue, but had made its one-sided allegiance quite clear when it stated that the English Métis land claims were important, but only because the

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<sup>55</sup> See: Robert Choquette, The Oblate Assault on Canada's Northwest (Ottawa, 1995), 221; Frits Pannekoek, A Snug Little Flock: The Social Origins of the Riel Resistance of 1869-70 (Winnipeg, 1991), especially pp. 10 and 180; and, Coutts, "Anglican Missionaries," 55. Choquette has arranged his book, entitled his chapters and presented his evidence in such a way as to convince the reader that a war existed between the Oblates and Protestantism, represented in the West most effectively by the Church Missionary Society.

<sup>56</sup> Scrip, redeemable for land or for cash, had been issued in Manitoba to Métis heads of family after 1870, in recognition of inherent Native rights of previous occupancy of the land, but primarily as a means of extinguishing claims to further entitlement.

<sup>57</sup> Sessional Paper 116e, 29-31.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 67.

town was growing up around them.<sup>59</sup> The next year the population of the town proper stood at over 2,000.<sup>60</sup>

In June 1883 the Times reported the formation of a "Settlers' Rights Association" in Qu'Appelle, established to press land grievances.<sup>61</sup> On 17 October 1883, it reported the founding the previous day of a "Settlers Union or association" in Prince Albert itself. In its next issue the paper whole-heartedly endorsed the Settlers' Union and called for more to join "the movement" in order to gain redress of land grievances.<sup>62</sup> Though not a part of the original organizing group, two new members were soon added to the executive, James Isbister and William Henry Jackson. Jackson, a recent arrival from Ontario, became the Secretary of the Settlers' Union.<sup>63</sup> Isbister joined him on the executive of the Settlers' Union virtually from its inception.<sup>64</sup> According to George F.G. Stanley, Jackson, Thomas Scott, who was another recent White arrival from Ontario, and Isbister "visited the various districts, organized local committees, and secured the election of local delegates to the central committee of the Settlers' Union."<sup>65</sup> In February 1884 the Times reported Isbister's leading role in organizing the farmers in his parish, St. Catherine's. The paper again endorsed this "agitation."<sup>66</sup> The Settlers' Union drafted a "Bill of Rights," which combined the perceived grievances and demanded the differing rights of both White settlers and the French and English Métis. The document was eventually forwarded to Ottawa by Louis Riel and the Settlers' Union in December 1884.

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<sup>59</sup> Prince Albert Times (6 December 1882), p. 5.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. (30 May 1883), p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. (13 June 1883), p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. (17 October 1883), p. 6, cols. 2-4, and (24 October 1883), p. 2, cols. 1-2.

<sup>63</sup> Donald B. Smith, "Honoré Joseph Jaxon: A Man Who Lived for Others," Saskatchewan History 34, no. 3 (Autumn 1981), 81-101. Jackson went on to lead an astonishing life, one which included service as Riel's secretary in 1884 to 1885, participation in the North-West Rebellion, the adoption of a Métis name and identity and then a role as a radical labour leader in the United States.

<sup>64</sup> Charles and Cynthia Hou, The Riel Rebellion: A Biographical Approach (Vancouver, 1984), 33-7; George F.G. Stanley, The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions (Toronto, 1960), 265 and 298-300; and, personal communication of author with Diane Payment, 16 September 1996.

<sup>65</sup> Stanley, The Birth, 300.

<sup>66</sup> Prince Albert Times (1 February 1884), p. 1, col. 4.

By April 1884, with so little response from Ottawa, the Métis communities believed that a stronger voice was needed if they were ever to be heard. At a meeting of both English and French Métis it was decided, after having been moved by Charles Nolin and seconded by James Isbister, to select six representatives to formulate their joint demands and also to choose a delegation to go to Montana to seek the advice of Louis Riel.<sup>67</sup> The communities would pick up the delegates' expenses. At another meeting held on 14 May, the delegates were selected, Gabriel Dumont and James Isbister being the first chosen. Two historians have described Isbister as being "a legendary name among the English half-breeds," at the time of his selection.<sup>68</sup> Four delegates were finally sent, including Dumont, Isbister, Moïse Ouellette and Michel Dumas.<sup>69</sup> Isbister was the only non-French Métis in the delegation. Isbister later wrote that he was sent "by the voice of the people."<sup>70</sup>

The Prince Albert Times reported regularly on the various meetings of the French and English Métis. In mid-May the paper seemed to be supportive of the Métis cause. It saw a unity of purpose with its own constituency. It reported that the Métis "seem to be fully alive to the fact that farmers interests are all alike and that union is strength."<sup>71</sup> However, in its coverage of the 14 May meeting during which the four delegates were selected, it revealed an alarming ignorance of the participants and a real disinterest as well. The paper reported that both James Isbister and Michel Dumas were the English delegates, while "the French members have escaped the memory of your correspondent."<sup>72</sup>

The delegates reached St. Peter's Mission, in Montana, where Riel was teaching school, in early June, and presented him with a list of seven grievances, all but two of which were directly related to land issues.<sup>73</sup> Riel decided to return to the Saskatchewan. He was undoubtedly delighted that Isbister was among those sent.

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<sup>67</sup> Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), Riel Papers, MG3, D2, File 18, fol. 139, Minutes of 21 April Meeting. The references from the Riel Papers were all recorded at this author's request by Diane Payment, a most supportive Winnipeg colleague.

<sup>68</sup> Bob Beal and Rod Macleod, Prairie Fire: The 1885 North-West Rebellion (Edmonton, 1984), 104.

<sup>69</sup> PAM, Riel Papers, D2, File 18, fol. 143.

<sup>70</sup> NAC, RG 15, Vol. 921, Claim No. 323, Isbister claim of 18 May 1886.

<sup>71</sup> Prince Albert Times (23 May 1884), p. 1, col. 4.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. (30 May 1884), p. 4, col. 1.

<sup>73</sup> The list is reproduced in Flanagan, Riel, 4-5.

In 1869-1870 at Red River, there had been open conflict between the English and French Métis. Isbister's presence boded well for their truly mutual cause, now jointly perceived and pressed forward in concert.

The intention of the delegates and of the communities which they represented was, in Isbister's own words, to proceed with "constitutional agitation" to achieve their goals.<sup>74</sup> Armed resistance was not an option even considered by most, and was certainly unacceptable to Isbister, to the bulk of the English Métis and to the majority of the French Métis as well. One of Riel's first major public appearances was in mid-July, at Prince Albert. At this and all future meetings, he and his supporters pushed diplomatic, peaceful means to redress their grievances. Though the greatest support for Riel came of course from among the French Métis, the cause which he led found a great deal of support among both the English Métis and the White settlers. They held a community of grievances against the central government which seemed, briefly at least, to transcend ethnic divisions.

However, while some Whites, like Jackson, stuck with Riel to the end, the Times was quick to abandon its previously, loudly declared support for a mutuality of interests. In its last two July 1884 issues it condemned Riel soundly, employing openly racist epithets. The events of 1869-1870 at Red River would never be forgiven in most English, White quarters, and certainly this was the case with the Times. It declared that Riel's mere presence would split "the movement."<sup>75</sup> More than likely, it was the paper's reaction which weakened the movement. After condemning Riel and his supporters, the Times fell silent. Not only did it not report on the activities of Riel, Isbister, Jackson and the Settlers' Union, but for more than two months it stopped altogether addressing its cause célèbre, the land-related grievances of its own White community. In early October, the paper finally explained its long silence on these matters. It did not want to be associated with "professional agitators." It had chosen "legitimate" means to agitate for redress, but others, namely Riel and the Settlers' Union, had opted for some undefined "illegitimate" means.<sup>76</sup> Since at this stage no one had advocated anything but peaceful negotiation, one suspects that the Times' reaction was based on a combination of undying personal hatred of Riel, a general racism and, perhaps, resentment at having been displaced as the champion of the people by others, Métis and White, more radical and potentially more effective.

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<sup>74</sup>

NAC, RG 15, Vol. 921, Claim No. 323, James Isbister statement of 18 May 1886.

<sup>75</sup>

Prince Albert Times (18 July 1884), p. 1, col. 5, and (25 July 1884), p. 4, cols. 1-2.

<sup>76</sup>

Ibid. (3 October 1884), p. 2, cols. 1-2.

The North-West Mounted Police kept a close eye on Riel and those around him. In a September 1884 police report on activities in Prince Albert, Jackson, Scott and Isbister were described as being "three of Riel's strongest supporters in that district."<sup>77</sup> Apparently the government tried to co-opt many of the leaders in the Métis community. Isbister later wrote that three of the four Montana delegates were offered government jobs, himself included. He stated, in an open letter published in The Winnipeg Sun on 19 June 1885, "Michel Dumas and myself were appointed Indian farm instructors, which appointment Michel Dumas accepted, but I declined."<sup>78</sup>

The gathering of petitions and the holding of meetings continued throughout the summer and fall. Hector Langevin, the Minister of Public Works was in the West in August 1884 and was supposed to visit the region of the forks, the District of Lorne, but he decided to cancel at the last minute, without notifying Riel. This probably further exacerbated Métis frustrations. James Isbister was to have been on the welcoming committee.<sup>79</sup>

Not unexpectedly, not all went smoothly within this diverse movement itself. In September 1884 Isbister, revealing his frustration, wrote to Riel complaining about the slow pace of organization. He stated:

I cannot understand what is your delay in not having our committee meeting sitting and working. Especially when, in every sense been harmless and only applying for our rights as Brothers and Sisters participated in Manitoba. I must say we the people of the Ridge, Red Deers' Hill, Halcro's Settlement and St. Catherine's parish find you are too slow, or does the delay rest with Mr. Jackson and his people. Yet we are satisfied to think you are doing every good to keep all our friends your people to work together unanimously and for this reason I came to ascertain if the committee are now prepared to meet within a short time.<sup>80</sup>

Isbister, who had set aside his strong sectarian views for the common good, also complained to Riel about purported efforts by

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<sup>77</sup> Sessional Paper 116f, 102-3.

<sup>78</sup> The letter was reproduced in full in Lamontagne, ed., The Voice, 204-6.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Flanagan, ed., The Collected Writings of Louis Riel/Les Ecrits Complets de Louis Riel, Volume 3, 5 June/juin 1884-16 November /novembre 1885 (Edmonton, 1985), 19.

<sup>80</sup> PAM, Riel Papers, MG3, D1, No. 412, James Isbister to Louis Riel, 4 September 1884. Extracts from this letter were published in Flanagan, Riel, 89, and, Maggie Siggins, Riel: A Life of Revolution (Toronto, 1994), 353.

certain Roman Catholic priests to drive a wedge between the French, Catholic Métis and the English, Protestant Métis. Thomas Flanagan asserted that Isbister's "opinion carried great weight" with Riel.<sup>81</sup> After the North-West Rebellion of 1885 had failed and he was imprisoned, Riel praised the earlier constitutional efforts of "Monsieur James Isbister et d'autres Métis," and this despite the fact that Isbister had refused to join in the armed resistance.<sup>82</sup>

In March 1885, things fell apart. The federal government's response to Métis demands had been the sending of additional police. In mid-March Riel declared a provisional government. One week later, on 26 March, hostilities broke out at Duck Lake, near Carlton House.<sup>83</sup> For Isbister, for almost all of the English Métis and for the White community the only option from the outset in the pursuit of their goals had been "constitutional agitation." Isbister would have nothing to do with what he considered unlawful rebellion by Riel, about 250 French Métis,<sup>84</sup> and a large number of Cree Indians led by Big Bear and Poundmaker. Isbister's unflagging position had always been for peaceful negotiation. This was undoubtedly shaped by his particular life experiences, which included an Anglo-ingrained tradition of deference to authority, drummed into him by both the Hudson's Bay Company and the Anglican Church, and a reasonably prosperous and secure financial situation. As Lee and others have pointed out, the majority of the Métis who took part in the armed resistance were less acculturated and had less property than those who abstained from participation.<sup>85</sup>

When the armed resistance suddenly began Isbister was out carrying freight for the Hudson's Bay Company. He was apparently detained at Batoche and pressured to join in this radical divergence from the previously shared, peaceful path of resistance. He refused and managed to return safely to Prince Albert.<sup>86</sup> Despite the fact that Isbister had counselled nothing but constitutional means to achieve his people's goals, he was in for an unpleasant surprise shortly after his return to Prince Albert. He was arrested on 17 April as a "suspected rebel" and held until 23 May 1885. Many others who had taken part in the

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<sup>81</sup> Flanagan, Riel, 89.

<sup>82</sup> Flanagan, ed., The Collected Writings, 287.

<sup>83</sup> For the best analyses of the actual events of the armed resistance of 1885, see: Stanley, The Birth; and, Desmond Morton, The Last War Drum: The North West Campaign of 1885 (Toronto, 1972).

<sup>84</sup> Lee, "The Métis Militants," 84.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 78-98.

<sup>86</sup> NAC, RG 15, Vol. 921, Claim No. 323, Isbister claim.

diplomatic precursor to March 1885, but had not resorted to arms, were also incarcerated at Prince Albert.<sup>87</sup>

Isbister left three accounts of his arrest and imprisonment, and of the events leading up to them. In all three he asserted the peaceful and constitutional nature of "the movement." In his most eloquent piece, written for publication after the North-West Rebellion had failed, he asserted that he had refused in writing Riel's call to arms. However, he did not turn on his former allies in the struggle. Rather, he blamed the Government for its mishandling of events before hostilities and its violation of civil rights during the resistance. He wrote in The Winnipeg Sun:

I remained at home until dragged to prison, ill-treated there and confined like a dog for weeks, then finally liberated without ever even being told for what I had been arrested. Many others shared the same treatment. In defiance of all law except the sweet will of the Northwest Mounted Police, who, as they could not take any French half-breeds, had, I suppose, to make some sort of a show for their money.<sup>88</sup>

After the Resistance had been put down, The Prince Albert Times renewed its assault on the English Métis in general and on James Isbister in particular. In keeping with its anti-Conservative party line, the paper strongly criticized the Government for having attempted to placate Riel's French and English supporters with job offers, specifically naming only two, "Dumas and Isbister, known to be the most warm supporters of a 'Riel'."<sup>89</sup> Shortly thereafter the Times, with no evidence whatsoever, declared that the English Métis population had all along planned to join in the armed resistance, and were not the peace-loving people that they declared themselves to be.<sup>90</sup> However, the paper saved its most lethal venom for Isbister, who had dared to defend himself in his public letter. Not only had he proclaimed his unswerving commitment to peaceful means and condemned the violation of his and others' rights by the North-West Mounted Police, but he had suggested that one of the local White community's leaders, Chief Factor Lawrence Clarke of the Hudson's

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<sup>87</sup> Canada. Sessional Papers, Volume 19, 1886 (Ottawa, 1887), Vol. 6, Paper 8a, 122-24.

<sup>88</sup> Lamontagne, ed., The Voice, 204-6. See also NAC, RG 15, Vol. 1328, Reel C-14939, James Isbister scrip application, 22 July 1885; and, RG 15, Vol. 921, Claim No. 323, Isbister Rebellion Losses claim of 18 May 1886. Isbister's assertion that he was held without charge is confirmed in a letter from his lawyer to the Commissioner of the North-West Mounted Police. Parks Canada Collection (Winnipeg), Prince Albert, 15 May 1885, William Maclise to Lieutenant-Colonel Irvine.

<sup>89</sup> Prince Albert Times (19 June 1885), p. 4, col. 3.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. (3 July 1885), p. 2, col. 1.

Bay Company, had told him that the Government would never favourably respond to the demands of the Métis and that rebellion was their only recourse. Now much credence is given to the theory that Clarke might possibly have incited the Métis to resort to arms, whether intentionally or inadvertently.<sup>91</sup> The Times was outraged at this specific suggestion, and at, one is led to believe, the gall of a Native person, an imprisoned "suspected rebel" at that, to defend himself and to condemn publicly the actions of the dominant White society. The paper devoted a three-column editorial in July 1885 to an attack on Isbister. It labelled him a "coward," a "liar" and a "dupe." All along he had secretly planned to foment rebellion, the paper charged, but when faced with the inevitable consequences of his actions he was too cowardly to join with Riel and his compatriots.<sup>92</sup>

#### After 1885

Following the terrible events of 1885, Isbister slipped into a kind of documentary obscurity; there is apparently little record of his life after this time. When the Canadian Government set up the Royal Commission on Rebellion Losses, James and three of his brothers from the Prince Albert area filed claims, in 1886. James made two claims for lost livestock, the animals probably having wandered off while he was in prison, claims totalling over \$650.00, but he was awarded only \$25.00. His brother Robert, who went to Prince Albert proper for protection, received only part of what he claimed. George, who was judged to have made no effort to protect his property, had his claim disallowed, while Adam, the only one to take part in the volunteer forces hastily organized against Riel, received the most generous compensation.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> For example, see: Stanley Gordon, "Lawrence Clarke," in The Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Volume XI, 1881 to 1890 (Toronto, 1982), 195; and, Sprague, Canada and the Métis, 174. Interestingly, a newspaper clipping of Isbister's letter in The Winnipeg Sun is contained in the Macdonald Papers, with observations about Clarke's whereabouts immediately before the outbreak of violence written beside the appropriate section of the letter. Unfortunately, the author of these remarks is unknown. NAC, MG 26A, Sir John A. Macdonald Papers, Vol. 109, Reel C-1525, p. 43861.

<sup>92</sup> Prince Albert Times (17 July 1885), p. 2, cols 1-3.

<sup>93</sup> NAC, RG 15: Vol. 915, Claim No. 37, Robert Miles Isbister; Vol. 920, Claim No. 291, Adam Isbister; Vol. 921, Claim No. 323, James Isbister; and, Vol. 922, Claim No. 371, George B. Isbister. Copies of the Commission's final report are quite rare; it was not printed in the Sessional Papers. Canada. Royal Commission to Inquire into and Report upon Claims for Compensation for Loss or Damage Arising out of the Late Half-Breed and Indian Insurrection in the North-West Territories (Ottawa, 1887).

As noted earlier, James retained his farm at least until 1907. His wife, Margaret, died in 1895, and was buried in the cemetery at the Sandy Lake Reserve.<sup>94</sup> Besides his farming, James continued his church activities, which were always an important part of his life. The first Anglican church in Prince Albert, St. Mary's, was opened on Christmas Day, 1875. The second, St. Catherine's, opened the next year.<sup>95</sup> Isbister may have given the name to St. Catherine's Church, an indication of the esteem in which he was held locally.<sup>96</sup> In April 1884, the Times, reporting on the annual Easter meeting of St. Catherine's Parish, noted that James Isbister was one of only two delegates selected for the diocesan synod.<sup>97</sup> Other sources demonstrate his commitment to the church. He was both a school teacher and a lay reader in different parts of the diocese. He was a member of the rural deanery. He taught Indian and Métis children on the Stoney Lake Reserve, near Battleford, and on other reserves as well, almost certainly on the John Smith Reserve. When his farming career was over, he may have been the custodian of St. Mary's Church. He died at Prince Albert on 16 October 1915, at age 84, and was buried in the St. Mary's Cemetery.<sup>98</sup>

#### EXISTING COMMEMORATIONS

A cairn was erected in honour of James Isbister by the Anglican Church in 1984. It stands at his gravesite, and reads: "First Settler in Prince Albert, began farming in June 1862. Farmed at approximately 17th Avenue, and 14th Street West. Died October 16th, 1915 at age of 84." It was put up in recognition of his years of dedicated service to the church.<sup>99</sup> With the support of the City of Prince Albert, the Province of Saskatchewan and the Métis National Council, the James Isbister Memorial Fund is currently raising funds to erect a memorial to Isbister as "a founding father" of Prince Albert.<sup>100</sup> The Province of Saskatchewan has not commemorated Isbister, and is not apparently planning to do so, apart from its support of the James Isbister Memorial Fund.

The Historic Sites and Monuments Board has made many commemorations of Métis people and of events surrounding the 1885 Resistance. Cuthbert Grant (NHS, 1972), who lived between 1793

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<sup>94</sup> Glenbow, Denney, and, Memorial Fund, Package.

<sup>95</sup> Matheson, "The Church," 40.

<sup>96</sup> Glenbow, Denney.

<sup>97</sup> Prince Albert Times (25 April 1884), p. 1, col. 5.

<sup>98</sup> Glenbow, Denney, and Memorial Fund, Package.

<sup>99</sup> Memorial Fund, Package.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

and 1854, would, however, appear to be the only Métis leader designated by the Board who did not play a role in the North-West Rebellion. Gabriel Dumont (NHS, 1981) and, of course, Riel (NHS, 1956) are the Métis leaders of the Resistance commemorated. Both Big Bear (NHS, 1971) and Poundmaker (NHS, 1967) were Indian leaders of the North-West Rebellion also so treated. The Board has designated the following sites and events directly related to the North-West Rebellion, or to those individuals connected with it: Batoche (NHS, 1923); Battle of Cut Knife (NHS, 1923); Battle of Fish Creek (NHS, 1923); Duck Lake Battlefield (NHS, 1924); Fort Carlton/Carlton House (NHS, 1927); Frog Lake Massacre (NHS, 1923); and, Riel House, Winnipeg (NHS, 1976). In 1989 the Board also designated the Métis Riverlot Settlement Pattern, to be recognized at Batoche. No founder of any Métis settlement has yet been commemorated by the Board, though Xavier Letendre dit Batoche, the founder of Batoche, is mentioned in the Board plaque erected at Batoche and is presented in the Parks Canada interpretation at that site.

## CONCLUSIONS

James Isbister was an important leader of his people, if not the most important leader, during one of the most turbulent times in their history, and in Canadian history. He peacefully fought for years for the rights of the English Métis. Isbister helped to overcome years of division and animosity between the English and French Métis and was instrumental in temporarily uniting the two in a common struggle, led by Riel. Always an advocate of "constitutional agitation," he broke with Riel when armed resistance suddenly materialized from the morass of broken promises, fears and ethnic animosity.

The leadership of Riel, in 1884-1885, and of Isbister, in 1883-1885, left no immediate concrete accomplishments, but it could very well be from their common efforts that the beginnings of a single, united Métis nation might be traced. It was not until the 1930s that the Métis, then no longer divided by language and religion, began to organize politically to any significant degree. In 1887, L'union métisse St. Joseph was founded, but it was primarily a French, Roman Catholic social organization. In 1932 in Alberta and in 1938 in Saskatchewan, provincial Métis organizations were organized as the political voices of their people. The first distinct national, political Métis organization was the Canadian Métis Society, founded in 1968. The Métis National Council replaced it in 1982.<sup>101</sup>

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D. Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier, The Métis: Canada's Forgotten People (Winnipeg, 1975), 164-66, and, Jennifer S.H. Brown, "The Métis: Genesis and Rebirth," in, Bruce A. Cox, ed., Native People, Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit and Métis (Ottawa, 1987), 143-44.

James Isbister was also undoubtedly an important figure in his community, Prince Albert, a community which he clearly founded. He has not received the recognition that he deserves for this accomplishment. Upon retiring from the Hudson's Bay Company, he devoted his life to the service of his People, his community and his church, while providing well for his large family. For decades he held land and farmed in the community that he founded, and he played an important role in his church.

After his death in 1915, he was commemorated by his church. Thanks largely to the efforts of Ms. Doreen Isbister, he is about to be commemorated by the City of Prince Albert as one of its founding fathers. His wider significance has yet to be determined or to be recognized.

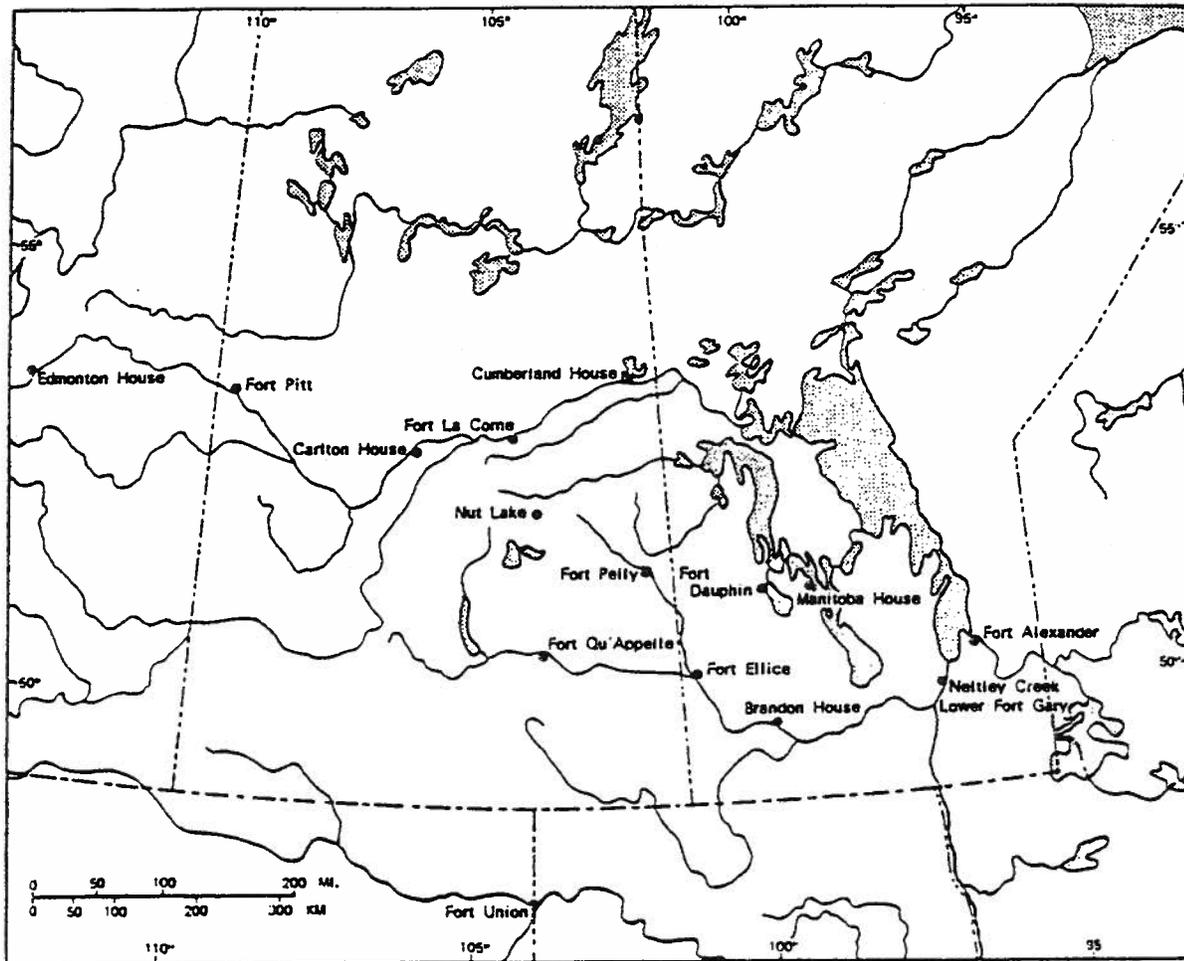


Figure 1. Map of some of the principal fur trade posts of the Canadian West in the mid-19th century (Arthur J. Ray, Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Hunters, Trappers and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870 [Toronto, 1974], 201).

