

# Metis historian awarded Order of Canada

By R John Hayes  
Sweetgrass Writer

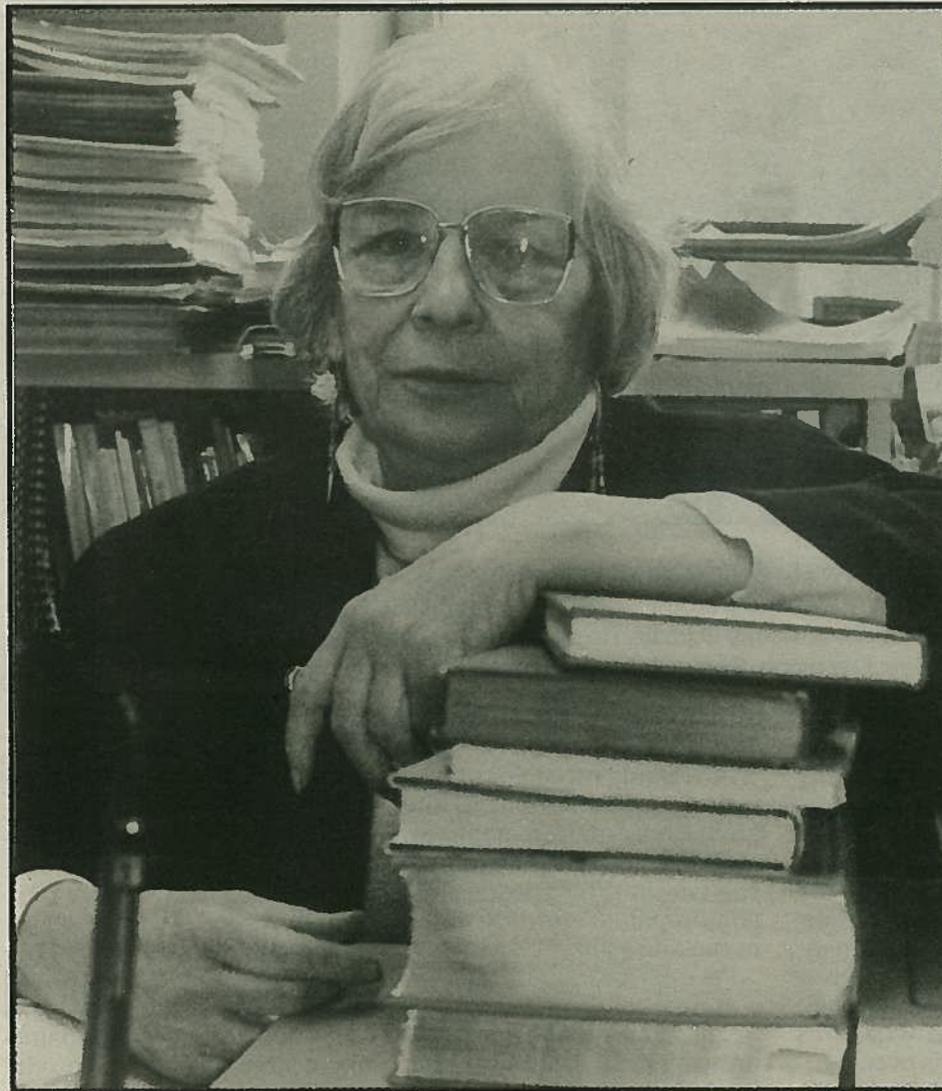
EDMONTON—Always fascinated with and passionate about history, which she made her life's work, Olive Dickason has had that work recognized by being made a member of the Order of Canada. She will be formally named to the Order of Canada, Canada's highest civilian honor, at an investiture ceremony in Ottawa on Feb. 15. Officially, her honor is being bestowed for her work on Canada's heritage.

"I don't know what factors go into the selection," Dickason said. "But I am accepting it on the understanding that it's a tribute to my work in Native history."

The 75-year-old former history professor made headlines in 1985 when she refused mandatory retirement from her position at the University of Alberta. After a legal struggle, she was reinstated to her professorship, and her stance that mandatory retirement was a form of discrimination was upheld by lower courts. She stayed on until 1992, finally retiring at 72 years of age. Her struggle ended in disappointment as the higher courts, to which the institution appealed the earlier decisions, ruled against her.

Dickason's specialty was and is Native history, although she had to battle to get into the field in which she later fought to stay. She came to post-graduate studies late, after a 24-year career as a journalist and raising a family, and intended to take Indian history, as she called it then. The University of Ottawa, though, which had accepted her as a graduate student, did not acknowledge that Indians *had* any history, and suggested that she take anthropology, instead. Dickason insisted, and eventually got her way.

"I was lucky," she explained. "A Belgian fellow, who didn't know



MARK MCCALLUM

**Former University of Alberta history professor Olive Dickason in her office in 1987. Her life's work has made her the recipient of Canada's highest award.**

very much about Native people, but knew a lot about discrimination, took up my cause, and the university eventually admitted me." She graduated with an MA in the early 1970s, writing a thesis called *The French and Indians at Louisbourg*, and went on to earn her doctorate in the late '70s, at the age of 57.

"The University of Ottawa had been responsible for my BA, as well," Dickason said. She grew up in Winnipeg, then moved with her parents to a then-isolated

reserve on the eastern shore of Lake Winnipeg at Manigotogan. When she could, she trekked back to Manitoba's capital to seek her fortune, which she found, in a way, while she was selling magazine subscriptions door-to-door.

Father Athol Murray, the famous guiding light of Notre Dame college at Wilcox, Sask., took the young woman with the Grade 10 education to the school and encouraged her to complete her high school and to take her

BA. She did so, working through a program, since canceled, in which the University of Ottawa granted the degree for work done at Notre Dame.

"Those were the days when jobs were looking for people, instead of people looking for jobs," Dickason said. "I went straight into journalism, and worked for the *Regina Leader-Post*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, the *Montreal Gazette* and ended up at the *Globe and Mail* in Toronto." She was the editor of the women's page in Montreal, became the associate women's editor in Toronto, then the women's editor.

"After my family had grown up, I was able to return to university," she said. "I applied, and was accepted at the University of Ottawa, and the University of Toronto. But by then, I had to work while I was going to study, so the logistics of the big city were just too much, so I went to Ottawa, which was a small city.

"I quit the *Globe*, and was hired on as an information officer at the National Gallery," she continued. "It was just ideal for me." The gallery is just a stone's throw from the University of Ottawa, so

she didn't have to spend much valuable time commuting, and otherwise wasting time.

Her doctoral thesis, titled *The Myth of the Savage*, was eventually published, and signaled the academic continuation of Dickason's career as a writer. She had a very important work of scholarship published in 1992 in both Canada (by McClelland & Stewart) and the United States (by the University of Oklahoma Press), *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*.

The book is now accepted as a textbook in the field of Native studies all across Canada, a field of which Dickason is one of the founders.

"Native history is moving along, but it isn't there yet," she said. "But I really do think that my work has been significant at getting the field to where it is now.

"When you don't have a precedent to follow, it's much harder work," she continued. "You find yourself having to make the landmarks, not be guided by them. I wanted to do honor to my ancestors, because of my family background, to give them their proper place in Canada's history. My first book, right up to my most recent, have been works of love—I'm very personally involved with both of them."

Dickason continues to be active in the field, and has plans that would daunt many a scholar at 30.

"I hope and fully expect that there will be more work done and that my work will be built upon, changed, even corrected. There's plenty of work being done now. It's a far cry from the way it was when I started."

When she finishes her immediate task of revising *Canada's First Nations* for a new edition, she intends to start on her long-term project, a comparative study of first contacts in America.