

Métis historian, scholar beats the odds — again

SHE is known by many titles — groundbreaking scholar, professor of history, author, legal challenger, Métis politician and even great-grandmother — but as of yesterday, Olive Dickason also became known as a woman on whom Canada bestowed its highest civilian honour, the Order of Canada.

And to many, it was proof that this celebrated Edmontonian had beat the odds yet again in her life and soared to success. In fact, it would be hard to imagine any set of odds more designed to ensure obscurity for a Canadian woman that those Dr. Dickason faced, of which she is only too aware.

Her success, she said this week, just hours before she boarded an airplane for Ottawa, where she was to receive the honour, is the result of “the accidental.”

“It’s a question of lucky breaks in life. You have to be there at the right time.” Then she conceded: “It’s a question of taking advantage as things come up.”

Among the barriers: Apart from being a woman, she is also a woman born in 1920 (she turns 76 next month), when opportunities were sparse. And she is Métis, a fact that helped catapult her to fame, but that might have held her back.

The woman who was eventually to earn three degrees, including a PhD in history, did not attend a high school because she spent her teen years in the bush in northern Manitoba. She completed Grade 10 by correspondence, but was forced to stop because there was a \$60 charge for



Edmonton

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Grade 11. “And where were we going to get that?”

As for going to university, she says now that that seemed as remote to her as flying to the moon.

By chance, she encountered Father Athol Murray, who ran Notre Dame College in Wilcox, Sask. She went to live at the college and eventually graduated from high school and received bachelor’s degrees in philosophy and French.

She had three daughters, became an award-winning journalist and ended up as a senior editor at The Globe and Mail. But after 24 years in the business, when her children were self-supporting, she opted to pursue a master’s degree, to the utter amazement of her journalist colleagues.

“I was not developing much as a person,” she recalled.

But when she approached the University of Ottawa about graduate work in the early 1970s, again she ran up against a barrier. She wanted to study the history of Canada’s first peoples. At the university, the professors said categorically that there was no Indian history. If she wanted to study Indians, she was told, she should apply to the anthropology department.

She held her ground, however, eventually enlisting the help of the Belgian history professor at the university, Cornelius Jaenen, who believed in the radical idea that the disparaged, non-literary first peoples might, indeed, have a history.

By the time she graduated with her PhD, when she was 57, she had helped redefine the way academic historians viewed North American aboriginals. Her book, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas*, became one of the defining monographs on the subject. It was translated into French (for which it won a Governor-General’s Award), and has also been published in Europe. Dr. Dickason has had inquiries about a German edition, as well.

In 1976, she became an assistant professor of history at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, and by 1985, the year she turned 65, was made full professor.

But again, she hit the wall. A few months after reaching the highest rank of her profession, and only eight years after obtaining her PhD, just as she was reaching her earnings peak, she was told she faced mandatory retirement.

Again, she dug in, taking her fight against mandatory retirement to the Supreme Court of Canada in a battle that lasted seven years. Eventually, when she was 72, the highest court ruled against her and she was forced to retire.

That same year, she published her most influential book of all, *Cana-*

da’s First Nations, A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times. It is widely used in universities as a textbook in an area of study that was not recognized, much less taught, a quarter of a century ago.

The field that she helped to found has now become, she has been informed by one of Canada’s grants-dispensing organizations, the hottest new area of historical research in Canada.

“The field is developing so rapidly, it’s breathtaking,” she said. “I wouldn’t have believed it possible.”

It is for this struggle to recognize and categorize aboriginal history that Dr. Dickason was given her Order of Canada. The topic has actually become trendy in part because it provides some clues to understanding Canada’s volatile modern politics.

“This is a recognition, finally, that we are a far more complex nation than we have acknowledged,” she said.

On the brink of 76, Dr. Dickason is embarking on her most ambitious project yet. Under contract to the weighty Oxford University Press, she is writing a book about the crucial first contacts between aboriginals across North America and Europeans. It was these meetings, she posits, that set the pattern for how the two groups would interact over the following, difficult centuries.

Her struggle now, she says with a laugh, is to master the intricacies of Windows 95 and the Internet as aids to her new research.