

Métis Writers – Darren R. Préfontaine

I) Métis Writers: A Brief Introduction

Today, Métis writers, playwrights, artists, musicians are emerging to provide a voice for the Métis. Métis men and women are raising awareness through children's literature, prose, poetry, drama, non-fiction and fiction. For instance, Métis academics such as Olive Dickason, Emma LaRoque, and Paul Chartrand have written engaging Aboriginal histories. Métis literary authors include Louise Erdrich (Gourneau), Marilyn Dumont, Janice Acoose, Warren Cariou, Beatrice Culleton, Lee Maracle, Gregory Scofield and Maria Campbell. Métis writing, specifically fiction, deals with the complicated nature of being of a mixed-heritage, finding acceptance of that fact and fighting racism from the larger society and occasionally from First Nations.

Traditionally, the Métis were excellent raconteurs of a large, fascinating repertoire of folk tales. Until recently, most Métis did not receive a formal education and therefore were illiterate. Nevertheless, their vibrant folk culture and storytelling ability transcended this inability. This storytelling ability has been handed down to two generations of Métis writers.

Ironically, the Métis have only recently been able to tell their own stories. In the past, such cultural producers as Helen Creighton, Edith Fowke and Lucinda Clemens appropriated Aboriginal, French-Canadian and Celtic-Canadian folk songs and tales. Cultural producers are outsiders who appropriate Aboriginal and other traditional culture for political and financial purposes, while maintaining that they are "preserving" the culture, which they are taking from. In Aboriginal communities taking stories, knowledge and medicine belonging to others is a grave offence. When telling a traditional story, credit must be given

to the Elder who told it to you, and permission must be asked to use the story and an offering of tea and or tobacco must be given to the Elder. This is necessary protocol which cultural producers ignore. Lucinda Clemens took Métis and French-Canadian folksongs and sang them as operettas – which was very different from their original versions.

However, Métis authors are reclaiming the Métis' rich folk heritage. For instance, the respected Métis author, scholar and storyteller Maria Campbell has translated many of the rich folk legends told to her by Elders in her community in *Stories of the Road Allowance People*. This book is richly illustrated by Sherry Farrell-Racette, and contains ten folk tales written to simulate the Métis Elders. In her introduction, Campbell did something, which the cultural producers and other colonizers of Aboriginal oral culture have failed to do: she credits each of the Elders who told her these stories because the Elders themselves own them.

Another problem that Métis authors had to overcome was the long-held, and often racist interpretation of the Métis by other authors. American and Canadian scholars have documented a whole tradition of racist literary works, which stereotyped the Métis. Rarely did Métis people write about themselves and their own history.

Métis women themselves, through their writing, began in the 1970s to challenge their marginalization as Métis and as Métis women. The first author to address the hard issues surrounding the life and times of Métis women was Maria Campbell in her book *Halfbreed*. After its release in 1973, Campbell paved the

way for a new generation of Métis women writers. In addition, *In Search of April Raintree*, by Beatrice Culleton also poignantly illustrated the challenges which many Métis women face, particularly regarding their own Métis identity, the effects of racism, and the impacts of the child welfare system on Métis children and families.

II) Brief Biographies of Selected Métis Authors

a) Beatrice Culleton

White Man, when you first came, most of our tribes began with peace and trust in dealing with you, strange white intruders. We showed you how to survive in our homelands. We were willing to share with you are our vast wealth. Instead of repaying us with gratitude, you, White Man, turned on us, your friends. You turned on us with your advanced weapons and your cunning trickery.

As Long As the Sun Shall Rise...

Beatrice Culleton, a Manitoba Métis author, playwright and novelist, was born on 27 August 1949 in St. Boniface Manitoba, to Louis and Mary Clara Mosionier. Beatrice was the youngest of four children in a dysfunctional and broken home. At age three she was taken away from her parents and raised in a series of foster homes, and away from her family and Métis heritage. Taunted and increasingly abused, she began denying her Aboriginal heritage after she was ten and wholeheartedly embraced Euro-Canadian values. This odyssey wrecked havoc on her personal identity and she went from foster home to foster home and it eventually destroyed two of her sisters: they committed suicide. She eventually settled in Toronto, where she currently resides. As a trained accountant, Ms. Culleton never envisioned that she would become a writer. However, the suicide of her sister in 1980, spurred her to write about her and her family's inner torment.

Ms. Culleton first novel *In Search of April Raintree*, which was published in 1983, was given the new title *April Raintree* in 1984. The novel, which is highly psychological, was largely auto-biographical and dealt with the painful experiences which many young Aboriginal people face trying to discover who they really are. The theme of the book articulated the necessity of community and self-healing, and as such it, was given wide acclaim by both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal population.

April Raintree is set in Winnipeg and it tells the story of two sisters who have alcoholic parents who are oblivious to the destruction of their family, and this led to tragic consequences when the family's baby dies and the two sisters are sent to a number of foster homes. The two sisters grow apart and become gradually estranged from the other: the one sister grows up hating and denying her Métis heritage and the other sister embraces it. Later the two sisters meet when they are adults and the older sister, who looks white, tells the younger sister, who looks more visibly Aboriginal:

I am ashamed... I can't accept being Métis. That's the hardest thing that I've ever said to you, Cheryl. And I'm glad you don't feel the same way I do. I'm so proud of what you are trying to do. But to me, being Métis means that I'm one of the have-nots. And I want so much. I'm selfish. I know it, but that's the way I am. I want what white society can give me.

The two sisters go their separate ways and the Métis-hating sister, April, moves to Toronto and becomes successful and married, while the pro-Métis sister, Cheryl, becomes radical, sullen, inward-looking and withdrawn from society.

Eventually, the lives of the two sisters turn for the worst: April's marriage falls apart and she moves back to Winnipeg and she is brutally assaulted and Cheryl commits suicide, as her mother had. These tragic circumstances force April to come to terms with her Métis heritage. Written in a lamentable but emotional prose, the story is a poignant reminder of the inner pain and struggle, and self-

hate, which many Métis face when analyzing their heritage. It has become widely read in Europe and elsewhere as "Native" and not "Canadian" literature, and like Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* is a scathing indictment of an uncaring society which allows its children to suffer and of the colonization of its Aboriginal peoples.

Ms. Culleton has also written a book for children, *Spirit of the White Bison*, which is a history of the decimation of the bison on the Prairies. The protagonist in the story is a White Bison cow, who documents how the hunting of bison changed from the time she was a calf to an old infertile cow. She has also written a film script, *Walker* and she has also written a play for the National Film Board called *Night of the Trickster*, which was produced by the Native Earth Performing Arts in the spring of 1992.

b) Dr. Anne Anderson (1906 - 1997)

Dr. Anderson was a respected Alberta Cree-Métis scholar and linguist. She was born in approximately 1906 in the St Albert Métis settlement, now part of Metropolitan Edmonton. Dr. Anderson was brought up in a traditional Métis lifestyle. Her mother was Cree and she instilled an appreciation of the Cree language and culture in all her children. In fact, Dr. Anderson's mother commanded her to speak and write the language so future generations would not forget it. And that was exactly what she did by acting as a respected elder in the First Nations and Métis communities, and then as a scholar, which she became in her 60s!

Dr. Anderson worked until 1995, at the age of 88 when age and failing health forced her to retire. In her academic career, she wrote over 100 publications that covered a wide range of Métis and Cree culture including Cree-English dictionaries, Aboriginal medicines, legends and cookbooks. In 1985 her first major book was published entitled *The First Métis...A New Nation*, which outlines the rich and diverse history of the Alberta Métis people. Dr. Anderson indicated that her objective in writing this community remembrance, based on oral tradition, was to allow non-aboriginal people to appreciate the contributions of aboriginal people to the St. Albert community. Her mission was simply to preserve her aboriginal culture and to educate the Euro-Canadian population about Aboriginal people, culture, history and lifestyles.

Her academic career saw her teaching Cree and Métis culture at the University of Alberta, Grant McEwan Community College, Fort Saskatchewan Jail, Charles Camshell Hospital, Fairview College, YMCA and Edmonton's Boyle Street Coop. Her curriculum materials ranged from kindergarten to university levels, which ensured that she reached as wide an audience as possible. Her dedication to preserving Cree led her to found and be the first president of "Cree Productions Learning Centre" in 1974. Ten years later, she founded the "Native Heritage and Cultural Centre." Anderson is well known within the Alberta Métis community. A resource centre created by her was located within the Métis Nation of Alberta office. The centre houses a collection of materials relating Métis culture, history, and socio-economic lifeways.

Because of her commitment to preserving Cree and Métis language and culture, Dr. Anderson was awarded a number of honorary degrees and awards including an honorary doctorate of law in 1978 from the University of Alberta, the Order

of Canada, Native Council of Canada Award and the Woman of the Year Award. In 1985, the city of Edmonton named a park after her in its west end. Dr. Anderson passed away on April 21, 1997 at the age of 90. Her dedication to the Métis and the Cree of Alberta and Canada was immense.

c) Olive Dickason

Olive Dickason, Manitoba Métis, holds a doctorate in history and was the 1997 recipient of the National Aboriginal Lifetime Achievement Award for bringing a truer historical perspective to the history of Canada and Aboriginal people. Her other achievements include becoming a Member of the Order of Canada in 1996, receiving seven honorary degrees and in 1993, the Sir John A. Macdonald prize, from the Canadian Historical Association, for *Canada's First Nations*, which was voted by her peers as the best piece of historical writing in the country. Her book *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* has become a standard and accepted history text across the country. It includes the first consistently accurate portrayals, in a sound academic work, of Indigenous people in history.

While Ms. Dickason has almost single-handedly changed the historical perspective of Canada's Aboriginal people and their role in this country's history in the last two decades, she had to fight to study Aboriginal history as a graduate student. The University of Ottawa, which had accepted her as a graduate student, did not acknowledge that Aboriginal people had any history. Eventually, she completed her studies and research in the late 1970s. Her dissertation, entitled *The Myth of the Savage*, was eventually published and marked her first contribution to academic writing.

In 1992, at the age of 72, Ms. Dickason retired from a professorship at the University of Alberta, where she had taught since 1975 – after being a journalist for 24 years. In her time as a professor she has made many significant contributions to the literature of history in Canada. She has also influenced an entire generation of scholars. While officially retired, she actively, writes, conducts research and does consulting work.

d) Rita Bouvier

Rita Bouvier is a proud Métis educator and poet, who has dedicated her whole adult life to serving the educational needs of her people. Bouvier sees herself as having numerous roles, all of which are important to her. She sees herself as a mother, wife, daughter, granddaughter, niece, cousin, friend and colleague, as well as an educator, who has educated people in a variety of different means. She is also profoundly influenced by some of the important people with whom she has come in contact. She states that, "I have been profoundly shaped by the history and the present conditions of Indian and Métis people because my identity begins there. The values I cherish are those which were shaped earlier by my grandparents, Flora and Joseph, who raised me in the northern Saskatchewan community of Ile a la Crosse."

Ms. Bouvier considers herself fortunate to have been raised in a loving and nurturing environment, respectful of Métis and First Nations traditions. She wholeheartedly believes that her traditional upbringing has bolstered her ability to succeed in the non-Aboriginal community. Bouvier is fluent in Michif-Cree. She believes that while this "dual citizenship" has given her numerous challenges, it has also allowed to open numerous doors, both personally and professionally.

In all aspects of her life, Ms. Bouvier has worked consciously to maintain her identity as a Métis woman, while enjoying all the benefits of the wider society as well. She feels that she and all other Aboriginal people have an obligation to positively represent Aboriginal people and culture.

Ms. Bouvier is, above all, a passionate educator. She is very proud of the fact that she has benefited from both a formal and traditional Métis education, and this in turn has provided her with her worldview. She believes that, "Education, be it formal or informal, has provided the balance of both my intellectual development and spiritual development. Through my chosen career of teaching, I can participate in this on-going pursuit for myself and for others." She is former a member of the Board for the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research and is also an Executive Assistant with the Saskatchewan Teacher's Federation. She recently had a collection of poems entitled *Blueberry Clouds* which...

is a poignant exploration of the wellsprings of memory, language, and family that have shaped the contemporary experience of Aboriginal people in Canada. The violence and sustaining traditions of the past are brought into a single vision that revels in the power of the Cree and Mechif (sic) languages, eliciting a hope and beauty that is rooted in the rich history of Saskatchewan. Conversations with relatives, introspection, a love of the land, and a respect for values passed on through an extended family define this clear, humane voice. (From the Thistledown Press website: www.thistledown.sk.ca)

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World Wide Web Address: <http://www.writersunion.ca/d/dickason.htm>