

The Métis and the study of Canadian History – Darren R.

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What is history? This question has been analyzed repeatedly ever since the ancient Greek thinker Herodotus, who is regarded as the "Father of History", created the discipline of history. **History** is the interpretation of past events through the use, sometimes selective, of **primary source documents**. It is the collective memory of past events overtime, and its interpretations change as new primary source documents are found or when new schools of interpretation and thought emerge and replace old ones. Therefore, history is not static, it is always evolving and changing to meet a particular group's vision of its past. For instance, a great event in history such as the French Revolution has a large body of facts and dates, which remain static, but with the emergence of a new document or a way of thinking, the events can and are reinterpreted.

History is not just about the dominant group in society either. In the past, historical writing in Canada was largely the preserve of Euro-Canadian scholars, and they wrote subjects on historical topics, which greatly interested them: politics, economic and military matters.

Historical writing at this time was extremely narrative, pedantic and full of flowery prose, which often made it long-winded and convoluted. This was an age when the **Great Man of History** school of historical thought emerged. Rather than studying society as a whole, one talented individual, either good or evil was analyzed. This school of thought, also loosely known as the "Political Interpretation of Canadian History", was in vogue from Pre-Confederation times until the 1960s. For the Métis, this theory meant that historians only studied Louis Riel and the political events, which led to the two great Métis resistances. Social and even economic factors, along with the concerns of ordinary Métis were rarely assessed in the historical literature. This also meant that history was written from an **ethnocentric** perspective: the activities of other groups, visible minorities, Aboriginal people and women were downplayed or were criticized, and a **WHITE MALE WORLD VIEW** was articulated. For instance, the history of the Métis that was written at the time, even when it was sympathetic to the Métis cause, portrayed them as savage, primitive and static, and that their assimilation or "modernization" (read Canadianization) was inevitable, and desirable.

The 1960s and the liberation of thought which it inaugurated soon led to the rise of new socially-conscious groups in society which resented the way **Institutional** history was written. This generation of scholars resented the way their groups contribution to Canadian society was either downplayed or ignored in the historical literature. This led to an explosion of writing by regional, feminine, Aboriginal and ethnic historians who wrote their own interpretations of the past. Social, intellectual, women's and **Ethnohistory** soon emerged. Other voices were finally heard. For the Métis, this has meant that the Métis experience as a whole and not just that of Louis Riel was analyzed. This phenomenon could be called from "Riel to Métis". Currently, the dominant scholarly history journals in Canada -- *The Canadian Historical Review* and the *Revue d'Histoire de l'Amérique Française* , as well the major popular history magazine *The Beaver* - use a number of interpretations of history, and no one interpretation predominates.

What this evolution in Canadian history and how it is written has meant is simple: Historians will no longer take for granted the lives lived of any group which has lived in the political space of what is now Canada. Articulating

their own social groups' **hegemony**, past historians only studied English and French-Canadian history, particularly the histories of the political classes of these two societies. This will no longer do. **Historiography**, or the science of how history has been written in the past, has changed overtime as society has evolved, and it has become a testament to the multitude of changes in Canadian historical thinking since the 1960s. Recent historiographical works such as *Metis Legacy*¹, have articulated many, if not most, of these much needed changes in historical writing over recent years. These essays and other historical works discuss all aspects of past Métis existence, not just Riel's struggles.

After learning all of this we should ask our selves: Why study history? Simply put, we have to remember and study history because by doing so we better understand who we are and where we came from, and how our society, and others like it, has evolved over time. The study of history also makes our generation better appreciate the struggles and triumphs made by our ancestors in order to make our lives better. We don't just study history to learn about past

¹ Barkwell, Larwence, J., Dorion. Leah and Préfontaine, Darren, R. Editors. *Metis Legacy*. Winnipeg and Saskatoon: The Louis Riel Institute and the Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2001.

battles, dates, and kings or to learn from the mistakes of the past, but rather we study history in order to understand how and why things are the way they are in our society. Concepts and the continuation of long-term trends, and how they affect us today, are therefore more important to an historian than forcing oneself to remember dates and people.