

Gunn, William Reginald. (1857-1912)

William Gunn was the first student to graduate from the University of Manitoba (1880). He was a Manitoba College student, who took honours in Natural Sciences and was awarded the Governor General's Silver Medal.

William R. Gunn was born on September 3, 1857 at Kildonan, the Métis son of Manitoba MLA John Gunn¹ (b. 1826) and Emma Garrioch, the daughter of William Garrioch and Nancy Cook. William died in December 1912 at Melfort, Saskatchewan.

William's paternal grandparents were Donald Gunn born 1797 and Margaret Swain, the Métis daughter of James Swain and an unnamed Indigenous woman.



¹ **John Gunn, M.L.A. (1826-1898)**

John Gunn was born on August 8, 1826 at St. Andrew's, the son of Donald Gunn and his Métis wife, Margaret Swain. John was educated by his father. He was a farmer and later worked as a teacher at St. John's Day School from 1845 to 1847. On February 2, 1855, he married Emma Garrioch (1825-1921) at St. John's. She was the fifth daughter of William Garrioch. They had at least nine children: Margaret Jane Gunn (b. 1855), William R. Gunn (b.1857), Donald Gunn (b.1859), John James Gunn (b. 1861), Emma Ann Gunn (b.1862), Mary Gunn (b.1864), Reverend Henry George Gunn (b. 1866), Gilbert Garrioch Gunn (b. 1868), and Margaret Gunn (b. 1877). John was elected a School Trustee in 1871 and served as Secretary-Treasurer of the Board from its organization in that year. He was elected to the Manitoba Legislature for the St. Andrews North constituency at the 1874 general election and was re-elected in 1878. He was defeated in each of the 1879 and 1883 elections. He died on January 8, 1898 at Little Britain on the Red River.

In 1876, at Little Britain, William married Catherine Ann Mowat, born November 26, 1857, the Métis daughter of Edward Mowat and Jane Norquay. Their children were:

- Donald Edward, 1877-1954.
- Mary Jane, born 1879.
- James, born 181.
- William, 1888-1969.
- Alexander Montgomery, 1891-1954.
- Victor John, 1897-1975.

Catherine Ann died on June 6, 1950 at Shawnavon, Saskatchewan.

An investigation into the university's early graduates

Source: <http://news.umanitoba.ca/an-investigation-into-the-universitys-early-graduates/>

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Almost a century after the U of M's first convocation, a *Winnipeg Tribune* writer noted, "Back in 1880, someone probably turned to William Reginald Gunn and said at some point, 'You're going to be remembered as the first graduate from the University of Manitoba.'" (Winnipeg Tribune, October 14, 1977)

In fact, Gunn would be remembered for the next 137 years, not only as the first recipient of a University of Manitoba degree, but as an exemplary Manitoba College student, who took honours in Natural Sciences and was awarded the Governor General's Silver Medal.

Now, it's been confirmed, that first graduate was also Métis.

More graduates followed Gunn in 1881 but beyond names, graduation dates, and honours, not much more is known about the university's first graduates.

Though history has obscured the facts, a rumour persisted over the years: of the first seven graduates of the University of Manitoba, four graduates were Métis or Indigenous.

FOLLOWING THE HISTORICAL TRAIL

The rumour has circulated through the university and made its way to Archives & Special Collections. The claim has been made on multiple occasions though the statement is often preceded by "I'm not sure where I heard this, but..."

Despite its unclear origins, the unconfirmed account warranted further investigation and follow up in the University of Manitoba's 140th year and in congruence with The Legacy of Alexander Kennedy Isbister exhibition series. The multi-part exhibit, organized by Archives & Special Collections, explores the legacy of a Métis scholar and lawyer, Alexander Kennedy Isbister, [a Métis] who gifted \$83,000 to the university in 1883, to fund a scholarship that would be awarded to students of merit, no matter their gender, "race, creed, language or nationality."

Isbister's vision of the university was one of inclusion and diversity, and a retrospective exploration of his legacy has involved retracing firsts in student achievements.

CONFIRMING THE HISTORICAL RECORD

Confirming the name and graduation date of the University of Manitoba's first Indigenous or Métis student would support this aim and substantiate the rumour.

Accordingly, Archives & Special Collections set out to compile a list of those first seven graduates but instead, came up with a total of fifteen graduates between 1880 and 1882. In addition to being the first graduate, Gunn was also the only student to receive a degree in 1880.

Between 1881 and 1882, the U of M conferred another six degrees to Manitoba College students: George F. Munroe, J.B. Polworth, A.M. Campbell, R.G. McBeth, N. McCallum and R.R. Sutherland. Degrees were also awarded to W.T.B. Kennedy, R.F. McLennan, S.P. Matheson, George Mackay, Robert Machray and James Flett from St. John's College, and Napoleon Betournay, Albert Betournay and Patrick Haverty from St. Boniface College.

With the list established, we hoped to identify the first Métis or Indigenous graduate among them by tracing their ancestry.

As a result, we can finally confirm the identity of the university's first Métis graduate, who is also, as it happens, the University's very first graduate.

MÉTIS ROOTS GOING BACK THREE GENERATIONS

William Reginald Gunn's great-grandmother on his mother's side was a Cree woman named Agatha Kanapawanakan from York Factory. Less is known of his paternal great-grandmother but she was an Indigenous woman, believed to be Cree as well, living in the area of Fort Severn. His Métis roots go back three generations.

And so, in the university's 140th year, we can now say to Mr. Gunn, "You're going to be remembered as the first Métis graduate from the University of Manitoba."

Gunn will be featured in the current display at Archives & Special Collections as part of The Legacy of Alexander Kennedy Isbister series, along with other records documenting the history of Indigenous students, faculty members, and organizations at the University of Manitoba.



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