"Back to Batoche: Métis History and Memory 1885-2015"

Brendan Thomas
College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses

Part of the Canadian History Commons, Intellectual History Commons, and the Other History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorstheses/1253

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
Back to Batoche: Métis History and Memory 1885-2015

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in the Department of History from The College of William & Mary

by

Brendan Michael Thomas

Accepted for High Honors
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

Andrew Fisher, Director

Danielle Moretti-Langholtz

Frederick Corney

Williamsburg, VA
May 2, 2018
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction- Memory, History, and Métis Identity

This paper is primarily concerned with historical memory, and the ways in which indigenous peoples remember their past within a settler colonial context. For native peoples, the past is often a battleground, where native interpretations of events come up against colonial, European narratives that emphasize native erasure and Euro-American colonial triumph. Thus for native people, reclaiming the past and articulating a distinct form of their own history is vital to emphasizing their continued presence in the contemporary world. Through an examination of the Métis people of Western Canada, who, since the late 19th and early 20th century have sought to reclaim their history, I hope to show that for native peoples, the past is a battleground that is directly tied to contemporary native concerns.

Members of the Métis Nation see themselves as a distinct native polity that emerged in the Red River Valley of Western Canada in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, from the offspring of unions between predominantly Cree and Ojibwe people and European fur traders and trappers. Throughout the 19th century, the Métis established themselves as a key political force on the Northern Plains of North America, becoming vital cogs of the provisioning of the early fur trade and later as vital suppliers of buffalo robes for the Eastern Euro-American market.

Following the acquisition of the “North West” by the Dominion of Canada in 1869, the Métis, led by a young Louis Riel, came into conflict with the Canadian government, and managed to negotiate their rights through the Manitoba Act of 1870, which guaranteed the Métis or “Half-Breeds” native title to their land in Red River. Nevertheless, in the following years the Canadian government proceeded to extinguish Métis land title in Red River, and as a consequence many Métis fled westward to the South Saskatchewan River Valley, still somewhat out of reach of the Canadian government. It was here that in 1885 Louis Riel and his military commander Gabriel
Dumont declared independence from the Canadian state, and fought the North West War against a large Canadian army. Always a losing battle for the Métis, the war culminated with the defeat of the Métis at the town of Batoche, Saskatchewan, where Riel had set up his new nation’s capital. Following defeat in 1885, material conditions for the Métis continued to deteriorate, and the Canadian government carried out a concerted campaign to erase their national identity, culminating in 1906 with the removal of the ethnic designation “Half-Breed” from the Canadian census.

The question of Métis indigeneity is one that has been hotly debated among scholars, activists, and the Canadian public for over a century. The Métis, however, have always seen themselves as native and having aboriginal title to land in Canada. Chris Andersen, a prominent Métis scholar, argues that the Métis do in fact constitute an “indigenous nation” with a strong collective identity and a sense of aboriginal belonging. Andersen goes on to say that the binary between native and non-native is one constructed by the colonial governments in Canada and the United States, and although the Métis do not really fit conveniently within either camp racially, from a cultural perspective they draw much of their collective identity from their native heritage. Indeed, beyond this, functionally, the Métis have experienced a similar relationship with colonial powers as many other native groups in the Americas. As is explored in the rest of this paper, the Canadian government has sought frequently to take Métis land and erase their title to it, portray the Métis as backwards and primitive “savages” and eventually to erase Métis presence altogether. Thus, I argue that in their culture, self-identification, and their history of suppression and erasure by the Canadian state, the Métis do constitute a native polity.

---

As a native people, the Métis are thus obstacles to the completion of the “settler colonial project.” This paper relies on an understanding of a distinct form of colonialism, settler colonialism, an ongoing structure concerned primarily with the erasure of indigenous peoples and their replacement with settlers from the metropole, in this case Europe. Lorenzo Veracini sums up the key difference between colonialism and settler colonialism when he states that, while a colonizer tells the indigenous population to “work for me,” the settler colonizer tells them to “go away” or at least to “work for me and then go away.” Thus, a key component of settler colonialism is the erasure of native peoples, and a principal method through which this erasure is advanced is the creation of “settler narratives” of history that emphasize native people as nothing more than historical artifacts. These narratives, created and reinforced primarily by settler historians, consequently concern themselves with relegating native people to the distant past, with little to no importance in the settler present. In this context of settler narratives and erasure, Veracini argues that “indigenous persistence and survival become crucial,” in resisting the success of the ongoing settler colonial project.

The Northwest War and the Battle of Batoche have thus come to represent the “vanishing point” for the Métis in settler narratives of the event. This can be seen in the earliest histories written of the war, as well as in later histories written by settler historians Marcel Giraud and Joseph Kinsey Howard, works which have become foundational to modern Métis studies. Even works that don’t necessarily adopt Batoche as a vanishing point for the Métis, tend to present narratives of their history that conclude around the end of the 19th century. Works by scholars

---

such as Gerhard Ens, Michel Hogue, and Heather Devine, scholars writing in the present day, still tend to fall into this trap. Native Studies scholar Elizabeth Hawley has argued that the trope of the “vanishing Indian” continues to dominate popular and even academic perspectives on native history, even when non-natives acknowledge that native people are, quite literally, still here. In Hawley’s words, natives are still “perpetually vanishing” in the Euro-American consciousness, and the Métis are no exception.

Since the Métis became more politically active and publicly visible in the late 1960s and early 1970s, more and more studies have been written concerning the Métis in the 20th century. These studies primarily focus on Métis political activism and the question of Métis identity, especially following the Canadian government’s designation of “Métis” as a racial category in the national census and within the Canadian constitution in the 1980s. Studies that focus on the political revitalization of the Métis and Métis nationalism emphasize especially Métis history within a wider history of radical activism and the Red Power and Black Power movements, out of which several scholars, including John Weinstein and James Pitsula, argue that contemporary Métis nationalism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Other scholars, including political scientists Janique Dubois and Kelly Saunders, and historians Joe Sawchuk, Gerhard Ens, and Diane Payment, have sought to emphasize the earlier roots of contemporary Métis political activism, with Dubois and Saunders arguing that the “Métis have been engaged in a continuous struggle for self-government since their emergence as a distinct Indigenous nation in the historic North-

---


West in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, an emphasis on continuity from the 19th to the 21st centuries is crucial for understanding the ways in which the Métis have understood themselves and their past, and so for the purposes of this study I understand Métis history as continuous from the 19th century to the present, although certainly influenced by the radical revolutionary and anti-colonial thought of the 1960s.

Since the Canadian constitution recognized the Métis as a distinct group in 1982, and subsequently added the designation “Métis” to the national census, the question of what exactly it means to be Métis has absorbed the work of many scholars. Joe Sawchuk, writing in 2001, argues that the term Métis has become an “overarching classification” that includes “many local, regional, and cultural variations which militate against their being considered a unified whole.” Recent Canadian court rulings have further muddied the waters of Métis identity, including the infamous Powley decision of 2003, which significantly widened the definition of Métis, and the Daniels decision of 2016, which similarly widened the definition to include “Eastern Métis” people, those living outside of the Historic Métis Nation of Western Canada but who nevertheless have come to claim a Métis identity. Chris Andersen has written extensively on this topic, and argues that the Canadian government’s widening of the Métis definition has transformed the Métis from an indigenous nation into a racial classification, as awkward and cumbersome as that of “Indian.” In a paper from 2016, Andersen and Adam Gaudry argue that recent court decisions such as Daniels have led to a “self-indigenization” of settlers with indigenous ancestry, who claim a Métis racial identity while ignoring the historical identity of

---


the “Métis Nation,” a people who trace their roots to Red River, and most importantly for the purposes of this study, Batoche and Louis Riel.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, it is this Métis Nation which Andersen describes that this study is primarily concerned with, which is an identity based in cultural and historical collectivity.

Few studies of the Métis (here used to designate this indigenous Métis Nation, and not the term “Métis” as a racial classification in Canadian demographics), have studied the way in which the Métis use their history to define themselves. Indeed, as Andersen has argued, the Métis Nation of Canada (MNC) which claims to be the national organization for Métis rights, ties Métis identity almost exclusively to an understanding of a shared history, as “an Aboriginal people whose ancestors historically self-identified as Métis and who resided in the Historic Métis Nation Homeland of western Canada.\textsuperscript{13}” Ens and Sawchuk, in their book \textit{From New Peoples to New Nations}, devote a chapter to early efforts by the National Métis Union to construct a historical narrative surrounding the Métis Nation and the Battle of Batoche, but they stop short of in-depth analysis of the major book that the National Union produced in 1935, A.H. de Tremaudan’s \textit{Histoire de la nation métisse dans l’Ouest canadien}, which constitutes the foundational work of a distinctly Métis historiography.\textsuperscript{14}

Scholars who have studied the 1885 Resistance and the Battle of Batoche in the context of historical memory primarily focus on the ways in which settler society and in particular the settler state has remembered the event. Such studies include one by postcolonial scholar Kevin Bruyneel, in which he argues the Riel served as a “necessary invention for the production of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Andersen, \textit{“From Nation to Population,”} 362. It should be understood that the Historic Métis Nation encompasses the Prairie Provinces of Canada; Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, as well as areas of what is now the United States, including northern North Dakota and Montana.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Ens and Sawchuk, \textit{From New Peoples to New Nations}, 113-130.
\end{itemize}
Canadian political identity and sovereignty. This paradigm presents Riel as a symbolic character against and with whom many settler Canadians have identified themselves, but pays little attention to his importance as a symbol of Métis historic identity. Jennifer Reid, a literary scholar, has written extensively about how non-native people have remembered Riel and the Northwest War, and she argues that “Riel and the rebellions” have been deployed by settlers “in the service of a variety of cultural agendas ranging from Francophone nationalism to Aboriginal rights.” While Reid admits that these tendencies have “neglected the fact of Riel’s Métis ethnicity,” she spends no more than two pages of her book discussing the way in which Métis people remember Riel.

The question of an “indigenous paradigm” in historiography is one which scholars are just beginning to study. In a seminal article from 2009, Seminole historian Susan Miller outlines what she refers to as the “indigenous paradigm.” She describes this paradigm as originating with the writers of the Red Power movement in the 1960s, such as Vine Deloria Jr. and Clyde Warrior, and rooted in using history as a means of “addressing the status and conditions of American Indians.” Miller goes on to assert that this indigenous paradigm uses “indigenous narratives that contradict state hegemonies” and lay out “historical matter that tribes can use to pursue their national interests.” Although the written form of the Métis tradition in historiography predates Miller’s origin date for the “indigenous paradigm,” her claims can

---

17 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 40.
certainly be said to hold true, as Métis historians have sought to present counternarratives that intentionally relate the Métis past to present-day struggles.

The written record, however, constitutes only one side of the coin of indigenous historiography. Public performance and heritage festivals represent vital methods for native people to communicate their understanding of their own history. Anthropologist Ann McMullen has written about the role that powwows and powwow culture play as a method of public history for American Indians in New England.\(^{20}\) James Clifford and Edward F. Fischer have made similar claims, with examples from indigenous peoples in the Pacific Islands and Guatemala respectively.\(^{21}\) All these authors understand these performance events as ways by which native people enact the tool of strategic essentialism, here defined as the ways in which “at strategic moments and in dialogue with imposed hierarchies, subaltern groups construct categories of difference, like race or gender, to generate historical and political coherence.” For groups such as the Métis, the employment of history is vital to constructing and maintaining categories of difference, within a settler colonial system that has and continues to attempt to erase or marginalize Métis identity.

Métis efforts to reclaim the story of Batoche have encompassed both the written and the performed. Neither Miller, in her discussion of the “indigenous paradigm” nor McMullen, in her discussion of powwows as public history performance, seek to understand these two methods of history as complementary or interrelated. For this, I turn to Latin American and Performance


Studies scholar Diana Taylor and her concept of the “Archive and the Repertoire.” Taylor sees both the written record and the ephemeral performance of history in the repertoire as valid forms of investigating the past. Indeed, she argues that for native people in the Western Hemisphere, performance has long been a more important method of understanding and transferring knowledge about the past to a wider public. When describing a Métis version of history, as this study aims to do, then we have to consider both the archival and performed ways in which members of the Métis Nation have attempted to create a counternarrative within a settler colonial context that emphasizes Métis historical collectivity and present-day consciousness, particularly at the site of their greatest defeat by the Canadian government, Batoche.

Métis efforts to reframe the history at Batoche have transformed it into a “site of memory” for the Métis, namely as their ancestral capital. This is a concept borrowed from the French historian and philosopher Pierre Nora, who argued that sites of memory are “any significant entity, whether material or nonmaterial in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community,” in this case the Historic Métis Nation. The “dint of human will” that has transformed Batoche into a site of Métis memory encompasses both written histories and heritage festivals held at Batoche by the various Métis organizations in Saskatchewan. Reclaiming Batoche itself and the historical memory of it are crucial to the mission of the Métis understanding of history, which as Miller would argue, seeks to employ historical information to aid present-day political fights, in this case for Métis sovereignty and land rights.

---


This paper is structured largely through an examination of the ways in which the Métis have contested the memory of Batoche in the 20th and 21st centuries, both through the written word, and through a struggle to reclaim the physical site of Batoche. In the first chapter, I examine the development of Métis identity and political cohesion in the late 18th and 19th centuries, and how they came into conflict with the Canadian government in the late 19th century, first at Red River in 1869 and later at Batoche in 1885. In this chapter, I place emphasis on the changing relationship between the Métis and the settler state, and how the Métis Nation engaged no less than three times in direct, sometimes violent, resistance to settler colonialism in the 19th century.

In the second chapter I examine the efforts by Métis historians to write a narrative of the 1885 Resistance that counteracted the prevailing settler narrative of Métis vanishing at Batoche, and instead justified the Métis cause in the war and their continuing struggles against the Canadian government. The two principal works of this Métis historiographic tradition are A.H. de Tremaudan’s *Histoire de la nation métisse dans l’Ouest canadien*, first published in 1935 by the Historical Committee of the Métis National Union, and Métis activist and academic Howard Adams’ *Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View*, published in 1975, which identified itself as a direct successor to Tremaudan’s earlier work. A close analysis of these two texts and the contexts in which they were produced reveals the ways in which the authors work to create and maintain a distinctly Métis interpretation of history, one which transforms Batoche not into a site of Métis destruction, but a rallying point for continued Métis activism in the present.

The third chapter of this paper focuses on the primary method by which the Métis have sought to reclaim Batoche since the 1970s: Back to Batoche Days, an annual Métis heritage
festival put on by the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan every year since 1970 at the Batoche battle site, currently a national park operated principally by Parks Canada. This event has served as a vital space for the Métis to reclaim their ancestral capital, and to articulate a Métis vision of history at Batoche. To emphasize this point, I examine a case study from the 1990 Back to Batoche Days, held at the height of the Oka Crisis, one of the most memorable clashes between native people and the Canadian government in recent history.

Métis efforts to reclaim Batoche since the 1970s have been somewhat successful, and have led to a largely collaborative relationship between the Canadian government and the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan in the presentation and interpretation of Batoche National Historic Site. In the conclusion of this paper, I examine an art installation, commissioned by the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan in 2015 and hung in the visitor center of Batoche National Historic Site during that summer, called *Riel on Ice*. I argue that *Riel on Ice* represents an embodied performance of a Métis historical tradition, and one whose unconventional take on the events of 1885 and the Battle of Batoche suggests the possibility not just of an altered history at the site, but of a Métis present and future at Batoche.

Since their defeat in 1885 by the Canadian government, the Métis have consistently sought to create and maintain a narrative of the events of 1885 that represents a meaningful counter-narrative to overarching settler narratives of history. These settler narratives seek to perpetually erase indigenous peoples, and relegate them to the status of artefacts of the past. In the Métis counter-narrative, Batoche is at the center of a historical and ongoing Métis struggle for rights and recognition from the Canadian government. This study of Métis efforts to articulate a historical narrative around Batoche in the 20th and 21st centuries is also thus, a study
of how the Métis have attempted to reclaim Batoche in the present, and thus build a viable Métis future in their historic capital.
Chapter 1- Métis History Until Batoche 1800-1885

Until 1885, Métis political activism can be understood as centering around direct confrontation of the settler power structure—first the Hudson’s Bay Company, and after 1867 the Dominion of Canada. The Métis often brought to these conflicts the real or implied threat of violence, and no less than three times did armed conflict actually break out between the Métis and settler government between 1814 and 1885. Following 1885, and the defeat of Louis Riel at Batoche, Métis political action shifted from direct, often violent confrontation, to more indirect forms of resistance, centered around efforts to reclaim the narrative of Métis history in the 19th century, especially the Northwest War of 1885. An analysis of this historiographical conflict since 1885 will form the bulk of the remaining two chapters of this paper.

The first part of this chapter explores how the Métis came to be a distinct community around Red River in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and the unique cultural practices they developed. Then, I proceed to a sketch of the political history of the Métis in the 19th century, through an examination of three highly memorialized and key events in Métis national consciousness; namely the Pemmican Wars and the Battle of Seven Oaks, the 1869-1870 Manitoba Crisis, and the North West Rebellion of 1885 and the Battle of Batoche. These three events have come to hold incredible significance for the Métis, and they remain sites of contention and conflict between the Métis and the settler state to this day.

Métis Origins- New France to Red River

First, we need to establish how the Métis came to be a distinct cultural group along the Red River in the early 19th century, and how this ethnogenesis informed their fraught relationship with the Hudson’s Bay Company, and later with the Canadian government. Through an analysis of how the Métis came to be a “New Nation,” we can begin to understand how the
Anglo-Canadian settler state viewed the Métis as neither fully native nor fully European, and thus as obstacles to the advancement of settlement that did not really fit into any narrative of settler domination and native retreat.

The term “Métis” was present in the earliest days of French colonization in the New World in the 17th century. Mixed marriages were fairly common, and often the offspring of these unions, largely between Frenchmen and Huron or Algonquin women, in the region of the St. Lawrence River became “frenchified.” Mixed-race marriages were highly practical in early New France. In 1663, the colony’s European population had a gender imbalance of 7 to 1 in favor of males, meaning that most men who desired a wife and children had much better prospects marrying into native families than trying to find a wife among the French population.

Marrying into the native population had tangible benefits for French traders as well, particularly those Frenchmen employed in the service of fur trapping and trading, the voyageurs who would come to be so synonymous with Canadian national identity. As the French colonies, never equal in population to their English rivals, sought to exert power in North America through the establishment of extensive trading networks in the vast interior, the pays d’en haut north and west of the Great Lakes, French voyageurs spread out as well, marrying into native communities and gaining access to both the social and economic networks of native peoples.

Despite the fact that intermarriage was prevalent especially among the French and their native trading partners from the 17th century, no distinctive Métis ethnogenesis appears to have taken place until the very end of the 18th century, by which point the French had lost control of New France and the interior, ceding it to Britain and the Hudson’s Bay Company after the 7 Years’ War. It was after this, with new competition between the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC)

---

25 Devrim Karahasan, Métissage in New France and Canada 1508-1886 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 21.
26 Ibid., 53.
27 Devine, The People who Own Themselves, 3-4.
and the Montreal-based Northwest Company (NWC), that the Métis emerged as a distinct community and culture along the Red River.

Métis communities had begun to spring up in the Western Great Lakes region in the late 18th century. British explorer Alexander Henry, traveling through the region at this time, made note of the distinct clothing and manners of the “Canadians” he encountered, including the trademark sash that would become a major symbol of Métis identity. Gloria Bell writes that, from Henry’s description, it is clear that the European public for whom Henry was writing understood the “Canadians” to be a “people of mixed race with a copper skin tone.”

Métis communities in the Great Lakes flourished as former employees of various fur trading companies, who had entered into marriages with Indian women, *a la façon du pays*, were granted permission by their employers to settle in company lands. These newly independent traders were called “freemen,” and their autonomous settlement of the Great Lakes and Red River regions would provide the impetus for Métis ethnogenesis.

By the end of the 18th century, many freemen were moving north from the Great Lakes to the Red River and settling along the land between Ft. Garry (Winnipeg) and the community of Pembina, straddling the border of present-day North Dakota and Manitoba. The reasons for this were many, but mainly centered around declining fur-bearing populations in the Great Lakes, and the prospects for buffalo hunting on the Northern Plains. In addition, the limited prospects for upward advancement within the newly Anglo-dominated fur trading companies prompted more and more mixed-race traders and trappers to strike out on their own as independent

---

contractors in the Old Northwest. Both Anglo-Metis and Franco-Métis communities formed along the Red River, with the two nationalities divided along company lines. The Franco-Métis were generally former employees of the NWC, while the Anglo-Metis were aligned with the HBC. These national and linguistic differences did not prevent the Métis from creating a somewhat unified society in the Red River area, however, with many Métis crossing company lines in the conflicts of the 19th century to stand in solidarity with their mixed compatriots.

The Métis developed unique forms of expression that would help them to distinguish themselves culturally from both their Native and European progenitors. The Métis developed “hybridized fiddling techniques” that represented a marriage of European musical styles with Cree and Ojibwe ones, as well as a syncretic dance style that would come to be known as “jigging.” These forms of expressive culture, especially songs, emerged among the Métis as they worked as voyageurs, making great canoe voyages across the Canadian interior, originating often as work songs. The expressive musical forms, such as fiddling, jigging, and Métis song, became vital cultural signifiers for the Métis, and helped to mark the Métis out as an independent people, through the performance of a cultural identity that represented something of a hybrid of European and Native influences.

By the early 19th century, the Métis had established multiple communities along the Red River and had emerged as a vital economic force in provisioning the HBC and NWC outposts in the Old Northwest. Gerhard Ens describes the Red River during this period as being a “Métis homeland” where the Métis could engage in both Native and European cultural and economic

31 Ibid., 15-19.
32 Ibid., 20.
practices, such as buffalo hunting and fur trading, as well as new blended expressive cultural events involving distinctly Métis musical and dance styles, such as jigging and fiddling. This world that the Métis were creating would soon be disrupted by a settler threat; namely, one Alexander Selkirk and his Red River Colony.

**The Pemmican Proclamation and the Frog Plain 1811-1821**

It was with the founding of the Red River Colony in 1811 that the Métis first came into serious conflict with settler society as a distinct cultural group. The defiance and violence with which the Métis resisted Lord Selkirk and his colonial government’s attempts to control the “half-breed” population would set the tone for the next 70 years of interaction between the Métis of Red River and the settler state.

Thomas Douglas, Earl of Selkirk was a wealthy British peer and philanthropist who was gravely concerned with the resettling of displaced Scottish farmers following the consolidation of Scottish agriculture during the later 18th century, when large-scale farming and sheep herding operations supplanted many independent subsistence agriculturalists. Seeking a new place to move these hard-luck farmers, Selkirk settled on the area around Red River. He wanted to establish an agricultural colony, populated by Scottish farmers and with a British system of land survey and allotment. Selkirk bought a huge tract of land from the Hudson’s Bay Company, covering the entire Red River Valley down into what is today North Dakota. He established the colony in 1811, and by 1812 some 23 settlers, led by the new governor of the colony, Miles Macdonnell, had arrived in Red River.

They were met by an angry Métis population. Some historians have suggested that the Northwest Company, eager to defeat the Selkirk Colony, because it directly threatened their...
position in the region, goaded the Métis into direct confrontation with the colonists. In this view, the Métis had no collective national, cultural, or social identity until the NWC provided it for them as part of a larger struggle between the two great trading companies, and thus they lacked any meaningful historical agency.\footnote{Ibid., 35; George Stanley \textit{The Birth of Western Canada}, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961).} Darren O’Toole, however, has convincingly argued that the Métis had already formed a distinct cultural and political identity before Selkirk’s colonists arrived, and that their anger at the HBC was motivated by more than just the charms of the NWC.\footnote{Adams, Dahl, and Peach, \textit{Métis in Canada}, 143-203.} Indeed, the Métis had their own reasons for resisting an agricultural colony in the heart of their homeland. For one, the Métis had become vital provisioners for both fur trading companies, and an agricultural colony directly threatened their livelihood. In the early 19th century, the Red River District, populated primarily by the Métis, was producing 10,000 pounds of pemmican\footnote{A dried, cured meat usually made from a mixture of berries and bison meat, a staple of Plains subsistence from the pre-historic period.} per year, which Métis traders took to trading posts throughout the Northwest.\footnote{George Colpitts, “Provisioning the HBC: Market Economies in the British Buffalo Commons in the Early 19th Century,” \textit{Western Historical Quarterly} 43 (Summer 2012): 185.} Further, the arrival of a central government in the region threatened the new-found cultural and political autonomy the Métis had come to enjoy as independent provisioners of the fur trade, far from the centers of power in Montreal and York Factory.\footnote{Adams, Dahl, and Peach, \textit{Métis in Canada}, 167.}

Tensions between the Métis and Selkirk colonists continued to rise, as the Métis frequently raided the struggling agricultural homesteads, while the colonists unhappily relied on the supply of pemmican that the “Half-Breeds” supplied them, as they toiled to farm along the river banks.\footnote{Howard, \textit{Strange Empire}, 36.} By 1814, the Selkirk Colony’s governor, Miles Macdonnell, was prepared to take drastic action. In an effort to curb Métis power and to cut off their main source of revenue and
food, Macdonnell declared a new law in the colony, one that has come to be known as the Pemmican Proclamation. In this Proclamation, signed on January 8, 1814 at Pembina, Macdonnell reiterated Selkirk’s right to the land, as ceded to him by the governor of the HBC, and made evident the plight of the agricultural colonists in a “yet uncultivated” land. To solve this problem, Macdonnell demanded that “no persons trading in furs or provisions within the Territory,” for the HBC or the NWC, “shall take out any provisions...raised within the said Territory.” The proclamation further promised to arrest and prosecute anyone found attempting to move pemmican or any other provision outside the colony’s boundaries.

This unilateral declaration incensed the Métis, as the provisions trade represented their main source income and particularly buffalo hunting and pemmican processing had already become key aspects of their seasonal round. Rather than putting an end to the escalating conflict and undercutting Métis and NWC power in the region, Macdonell’s proclamation only served to further incense the now-directly-threatened Métis. More than anything, it was this imposition of law that enraged the people of the “New Nation” so much. Up to this point, the Red River region had been largely devoid of colonial authority, and as H. Robert Baker has pointed out, the Métis preferred it this way, preferring “equitable solutions and flexibility” to “institutional solidity” and the rigidity of law. Macdonnell’s proclamation flew in the face of this fluid system and represented a direct assault on the rights of the Métis.

By 1816, tensions had developed into all-out warfare between the Métis and the colonists. In June 1815, the Métis had managed to harass the settlers into signing a ceasefire.

---

44 Often called the “Capital of the New (Métis) Nation” Pembina was the site of a number of trading posts and forts occupied by both the HBC and the NWC, and later the American Fur Trading Company.


agreement, negotiated by the emergent leader of the Métis, Cuthbert Grant. Grant forced the HBC to sign the agreement, demanding that the settlers immediately leave Red River, and that the Métis be allowed to resume their provisioning and hunting unmolested, so that in future the HBC and the Métis might co-exist peacefully once again. The agreement succeeded in ending neither the Red River Colony nor the conflict. Macdonell left the colony in 1815 after a skirmish with the NWC forced him to surrender his position as governor, and he was replaced in the winter of 1815 by Robert Semple, a hot-tempered man who quickly reinforced the floundering colony with 85 new settlers, in revocation of the agreement signed just a few months earlier.

In the summer of 1816, the conflict finally came to a brutal and violent head, at a place called Seven Oaks or the Frog Plain, near the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers, at modern-day Winnipeg. What happened there is the subject of much debate among scholars, with some echoing Lord Selkirk’s description of the event as a “massacre” of unsuspecting colonists and Governor Semple by the conniving Métis, while others describe it as a “battle” in which the Métis triumphantly and decisively defeated the HBC and the settlers. Nevertheless, for the Métis Seven Oaks became an important symbol of their triumph over the HBC and the settler state. Joseph Kinsey Howard notes that the Métis wrote a song to commemorate their victory at the Frog Plain, in which they “sang the glory of the Bois-Brulés,” and their victory over the Anglos of the HBC. “Falcon’s Song” as the tune has come to be known, has become one of the

---

48 “Articles of Agreement entered into between the Half-Breed Indians of Indian Territory, on the one part, and the Honorable Hudson's Bay Company, on the other, viz.,” in Adams, Dahl, and Peach, Métis in Canada, 115-116.
50 Adams, Dahl, and Peach, Métis in Canada, 114-118; Ens, Homeland to Hinterland, 20; Howard, Strange Empire, 32; Carter, “Lord Selkirk,” 65.
51 Howard, Strange Empire, 32. Bois-Brulés was a common term used throughout the 19th century to refer to the Métis or Half-Breeds. A French word, it translates to “burnt wood,” suggesting the darker complexion and mixed heritage of the Métis.
most iconic Métis songs. It has been recorded many times in the 20th and 21st centuries, and is still performed by Métis musicians today.52

Seven Oaks served as more than an important symbolic victory however. It also prompted a change in HBC and British policy toward the Métis, one that would recognize their power in Red River. The HBC merged with the NWC in 1821 and began to offer the Métis (including Cuthbert Grant, who had led the attack at Seven Oaks) land allotments along the Red River.53 The HBC granted land in order to promote agriculture among the Métis, while also recognizing that the Métis had power and control over the land and could not be easily replaced by settlers. This is emphasized by the fact that following the Battle of Seven Oaks and the merger of the HBC and NWC in 1821, which ended the so-called Pemmican Wars, the HBC made no effort to curb Métis buffalo hunting. Instead, the Métis around Red River established settlements and engaged in semi-annual buffalo hunts, becoming agricultural while maintaining their economic power in the provisioning trade.54

Thus, during the Pemmican Wars and at Seven Oaks in 1816, the Métis were able to establish their cultural and political autonomy to the HBC and settler society. Seven Oaks represented both an important military victory for the Métis and a larger symbolic one, as it has become for many Métis, the site of their ethnogenesis and the coming of age of a national consciousness that the descendants of the Red River Métis have maintained ever since. Through the memorialization of the battle in songs and storytelling, the Métis have come to remember Seven Oaks as the start of a national identity.

52 Annette Chrétien, “‘Fresh Tracks in Dead Air:’ Mediating Contemporary Metis Identities Through Music and Storytelling,” (York University: PhD Dissertation,2005), 133.
53 Ens, Homeland to Hinterland, 21.
54 Devine, The People Who Own Themselves, 110.
The Manitoba Crisis and the Emergence of Louis Riel 1869-1870

Following the cessation of the Pemmican Wars and the establishment of a mutual relationship between the Métis and the HBC, the Red River Métis entered into a period of relative political and economic stability. The Métis continued their role as provisioners of the HBC throughout the Old Northwest, and some of the iconic cultural developments occurred during this period. The Red River Cart, invented by the Métis in 1803, became a standard method of overland transport on the Northern Plains, with the Métis employing massive brigades of them while on their semi-annual bison hunts. In addition, the Métis became active participants in the buffalo robe trade, trading with the growing American Fur Company, and sparking economic growth following the 1840s, although the parallel decline in bison populations on the Eastern Plains pushed more and more Métis to emigrate from Red River and move westward permanently. As the Métis expanded to the west, they came increasingly into contact and conflict with other native groups out on the Plains, particularly the Sioux, both the Lakota (Western) and Dakota (Eastern) confederations.

In Red River, the Métis enjoyed largely cordial relations with their close relatives, the Ojibwe, Assiniboine, and Cree, from whom many Métis were descended. Further west, however, the Lakota, quickly emerging as a force on the Plains in the early 19th century, saw the Métis as rivals in the burgeoning buffalo robe trade, and the two groups frequently came into conflict. Especially in the 1850s, Métis hunting bands traveling through Lakota and Dakota territory on their buffalo hunts risked attack and skirmishes were not infrequent. This began to change in the early 1860s, as the Sioux began to violently resist the incursions of American settlers,

56 Ens, Homeland to Hinterland, 122.
57 Hogue, Metis and the Medicine Line, 52.
erupting into the Dakota War of 1862 and Red Cloud’s War of 1868. Following these conflicts, the Sioux and Métis entered into a more cooperative relationship, and indeed for a brief time the Métis became vital provisioners for the Lakota and Dakota, which worried the United States government greatly, now fearing an alliance of the Sioux and their northern neighbors.\(^{58}\) By the late 1860s, then, the Métis had developed, after some initial conflict, a largely peaceful relationship with their Siouan neighbors, albeit one whose development would be stunted by the impending political turmoil of the Manitoba Crisis of 1869-1870.

In 1867, the Dominion of Canada became a nation-state, independent of the British Empire, though still closely tied to it. At the time of Confederation, Canada consisted only of what are today the Eastern Provinces, with everything west of Ontario still being considered “Rupert’s Land,” “Assiniboia,” or the “Northwest.” The new Canadian government had expansionist ideas, however, and it was eager to gain control over the lands currently administered by the HBC. Fearful of an equally expansionist United States, Prime Minister John Macdonald and the Canadian government worked quickly to secure control of the Northwest.\(^{59}\)

On March 1, 1869, the British Crown approved the sale of the Northwest, or Rupert’s Land (encompassing much of the modern-day provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, as well as large portions of what are today northern Quebec and Ontario) to the Dominion of Canada. The sale was not to be finalized and made official, however, until December 1 of that year, meaning that between March and December of 1869 there was no official government in control of the Red River District.\(^{60}\) A group of Métis, led by a young Louis Riel, seized the opportunity created by this power vacuum to negotiate a favorable entry

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 53.
into the Dominion. After a force of Métis horsemen successfully prevented the entry of the presumptive Canadian governor, William McDougall, on November 24, 1869, Riel and his fellows, now called the Council of Assiniboia, made a declaration in which they refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Canadian government, and established a “provisional government...to be the only and lawful authority now in existence in Rupert’s Land and the North West.”

Although their declaration was quite defiant, the members of the Council of Assiniboia appear to have had little intent of actually creating an independent state. Rather, Riel and his colleagues wanted to make sure the Métis had a strong negotiating hand in the entrance of Rupert’s Land to the Dominion. They likely felt threatened by the impending arrival of Anglo-Canadian surveyors, who would undoubtedly not follow the French custom of land survey, leading to a loss of Métis title, and an influx of new Anglo-Canadian settlers to overpower the Métis and native peoples of the region. Likely too, Riel and his compatriots knew that a show of force and an act of political defiance such as this could be an effective means of securing concessions from the settler state. After all, if it had worked for Cuthbert Grant against the HBC, why shouldn’t it now?

Riel’s government succeeded in forcing the Canadians to the negotiating table, and early 1870 the Métis leaders had succeeded in negotiating the entry of the new province of Manitoba, centered around Ft. Garry and the Red River, into Canada. The “Manitoba Act” as it has come to

---

62 The predominant form of land allotment in Red River at the time followed the French custom of surveying lots in long, narrow strips stretching back from the water. The English, meanwhile, and the Anglo-Canadians, tended to use a rectangular system of survey. Considering that the Canadians and the HBC had negotiated the sale of Rupert’s Land without consulting the Métis or First Nations populations living there, there is little to suggest that, without some type of resistance, the Canadian government would have recognized Métis land title.
be known, was signed by the Queen on May 12, 1870, and established Manitoba as a bilingual province, with the Canadian government promising to set aside 1.4 million acres of land for the “half-breed residents.” Further the Act reaffirmed the land title granted by the HBC, assuaging Métis fears that their pre-existing title would be extinguished by the new government. It appeared, then, that Riel and his supporters had succeeded in maintaining the status quo, and negotiating a strong position for the Métis within the Dominion.

Yet the Canadian government under John Macdonald, and the Anglo-Canadians already living in Manitoba in 1870, had other ideas. Although Riel and his Métis army never came to blows directly with Canadian troops, a number of small skirmishes broke out between the Canadian loyalist factions in Rupert’s Land and the pro-Riel factions. In one of these skirmishes, Riel’s forces took a young Anglo-Canadian man named Thomas Scott prisoner, and eventually Riel had him executed. Kevin Bruyneel argues that this act, as well as Riel’s defiance of the Canadian government, “represented a violent obstruction to nation-building.” Following the Scott execution, the Anglo-Canadian press portrayed Riel as a treasonous murderer, and clamored for his trial and execution.

Riel and his government disbanded in the aftermath of the Manitoba Act, as a Canadian army prepared to move into Ft. Garry and establish “order.” In reality, the angry Anglo-Canadian troops may have intended to attack Riel and his followers, or generally harass the Métis government. Riel eventually retreated into exile in the US, but not until after being elected as a Member of Parliament, and receiving protection for a brief time among the French-Canadians in

---

64 “An Act to amend and continue the Act 32 and 33 Victoria, Chapter 3; and to establish and provide for the government of the province of Manitoba,” in Statutes of Canada, Vol 2, (Ottawa: Brown and Chamberlain, 1870), 20-27.
66 Ibid., 716.
Eastern Canada, for whom he had become something of a hero, symbolizing their struggle against Anglo-Protestant domination.67

Riel’s banishment by the Canadian government suggests a signal change in the way colonial authorities dealt with the Métis at Red River. In 1816, Cuthbert Grant had led an attack that had resulted in the death of 21 settlers, including the British governor of the Red River Colony. The HBC and the British crown had made no moves of political or judicial retribution, and instead had given him his own tract of land and made peace with the Métis leader.68 Riel had used a similar tactic to Grant, emphasizing the Métis military strength to gain a greater bargaining chip in the negotiations with settler society, but the Canadian government was a different animal from the HBC and the Selkirk colonists. The aggression with which the Anglo-Canadian press and political system forced Riel out of the country foreshadowed dark days for the Métis to come. But, if you were to ask a Métis denizen of Red River in 1871 how their prospects looked, they probably would have been very optimistic. They had called the Canadian government’s bluff, and managed to negotiate their entry into the Dominion with their land title seemingly preserved, and a strong demographic dominance of Manitoba.69 The events of the years 1871-1885 would sharply change the position of the Métis, yet also lead to the most memorialized and contentious event of Métis history: the Northwest War of 1885 and the Battle of Batoche.

On to Batoche: Métis Emigration and the “Final” Defeat

Conditions for the Métis in Manitoba swiftly deteriorated in the years following the 1870 Manitoba Act, which had seemingly given them such a strong hand in the new Canada. The settler state’s active facilitation of westward immigration and colonization pushed many of the

68 Ens, Homeland to Hinterland, 21.
69 Ibid., 148.
Métis out of their lands on Red River, pushing them in turn westward, where they could remain somewhat out of reach of the Canadian government, for a time. Eventually, however, the settler state’s desire to complete the settler project, and supplant the Métis, would come to a head in violent conflict on the South Saskatchewan, in a fight that would come to be known as the Northwest War, ending at Batoche. Batoche in turn would continue to serve as a battleground between the Métis and the settler state, long after the “final” defeat of the New Nation.

A massive demographic shift occurred in Manitoba following its entry into the Dominion of Canada, which prompted many Métis to emigrate from their ancestral homeland westward. Ens argues that this marked a shift for the Red River Métis, in which their “homeland” had become a “hinterland” through the economic and political changes brought about by the arrival of the Canadian state.\(^{70}\) Indeed, the demographic data from the 1870s shows a massive shift, with the Métis representation in the Manitoba Legislature falling from 50 percent of the delegates in 1870, to just 16.7 percent by 1882.\(^{71}\) This shift was undoubtedly facilitated by the passage, in 1872, of the Dominion Lands Act, a law somewhat analogous to the Homestead Act in the United States. This law set up an organized system of survey, to divide the entirety of Western Canada into quadrilateral township lots, again inconsistent with the Métis method of survey. The act also essentially gave away land to settlers, with no compensation to the First Nations and Métis inhabitants of said land.\(^{72}\) Consequently the federal officials in charge of distributing the Métis land promised to them in the Manitoba Act slowed the process as much as possible, so that many Métis gave up their claims, selling them for next to nothing to land speculators. Canadian officials, including Prime Minister John Macdonald, argued that the Métis

---


\(^{71}\) Ibid., 149.

or “Half-Breeds” were not indigenous peoples, and therefore had no treaty rights. This position would inform Canadian policy toward the Métis well into the 20th century, and represent a major obstacle to Métis recognition for nearly a century.

The demographic shift and subsequent loss of power among the Métis in Manitoba coincided with a larger economic shift occurring on the Plains in the late 19th century. Bison populations were shrinking dramatically in the face of increased settlement from Europeans and increased hunting by Métis and other native groups on the Plains, to provide for the massive bison robe market in the US and Europe. Declining bison populations had pushed some Métis to move permanently from Red River since at least the 1860s, and several Métis communities in Montana and Western Canada today can trace their ancestry back to this movement from Red River, among them the Métis community at Batoche on the South Saskatchewan River. Métis migration was thus motivated by both economic factors, trying to remain afloat in the declining buffalo trade, and political ones, retreating westward in the face of a settler colonial state that had no use for them anymore.

A group of Métis from Red River settled permanently on the South Saskatchewan River starting in 1873, at places that had long served as wintering camps for Métis hunting bands, as well as a site of residence for Cree and Assiniboine peoples, close relatives of the Métis. At the Colony of St. Laurent, which included the settlements of Batoche and Duck Lake (later to become crucial historical sites), the Métis settlers established a document laying out the “laws and regulations” for the colony. In this document, from December 10, 1873, the “inhabitants of St. Laurent” established a government with a chief and councillors, yearly elections, and a

---

74 Foster, “Just Following the Buffalo,” 188-89.
75 Ibid., 190.
system of laws to govern the settlement. The document also recognized the authority of the
Canadian government, promising to “abandon their own organization and to submit to the laws
of the Dominion, as soon as Canada shall have established amongst them regular magistrates
with a force sufficient to uphold in their country the authority of law.” This statement suggests
that the Métis expected an independent, laissez-faire relationship with a distant colonial
government, as they had enjoyed for so long in Red River, while suggesting that until the
Canadians came in force, they would have no real authority on the South Saskatchewan.

As the 1870s wore on, however, the Métis of the Saskatchewan looked on with increasing
concern as the Canadian settler state continued to expand, undercutting Métis and First Nations
land rights along the way. For the Métis, the specter of the Canadian land survey and registration
system that had driven many of them from Manitoba loomed large. The Métis did not necessarily
object to white settlement, they merely wanted assurances before “extensive development”
began; specifically, assurances that their land and the land of their Cree, Ojibwe, and Assiniboine
relatives which they had been promised in the Manitoba Act of 1870, would be preserved, and
that their status as native peoples would be respected.

The Canadian government and Prime Minister Macdonald proved unwilling or unable to
provide these assurances to the some 1500 Métis now living on the South Saskatchewan, and
tensions rose through the early 1880s. The Métis, along with denizens of the white communities
that had been established in the Saskatchewan country, sent a delegation led by Gabriel Dumont
to bring Louis Riel out of exile and to serve as a spokesperson for their grievances to the
Canadian government. In 1884, Riel returned to his people, and established himself at Batoche,

76 “The Laws and Regulations Established for the Colony of St. Laurent on the Saskatchewan,” The Virtual
Museum of Métis Culture, Gabriel Dumont Institute, accessed January 30, 2018,
77 J.R. Miller, Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 234-35.
where he quickly went to work establishing a patron saint for the Métis, St. Joseph, and a national feast day, to be celebrated on September 24. Continued petitioning produced no response from the government, and in March of 1885, Riel declared an independent state on the South Saskatchewan, a country for the Métis, with its political and spiritual capital at Batoche.

This was a move that had worked, to an extent, for Riel in the 1869-1870 crisis. He had declared independence, and won some concessions from the Canadian government. But, as Miller has pointed out, the Canadians were much more determined and aggressive than they had been in 1870, and they had greater ease of access to the Métis in Saskatchewan than they had to Red River 15 years earlier. The arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway meant that the Canadian army could travel by train from eastern Canada to the West in a number of days, as opposed to the weeks and months it had taken them to get from Ontario to Red River in 1870. War was coming to the South Saskatchewan, whether Riel intended to precipitate conflict or not.

Riel and his military commander, Gabriel Dumont, assembled a military force that engaged a force of Royal Canadian Mounted Police at Duck Lake on March 26, 1885, and then proceeded to fight the North West Field Force, sent by Ottawa under the command of General Middleton, throughout the months of April and May. The Métis were outnumbered and could not stand up to the Canadians in an open battle, but Dumont was a wily commander who used his knowledge of the terrain and Métis skill as scouts and horse riders to ambush and harass the Canadian forces as they made their way up to Riel’s capital at Batoche. It was a losing campaign however, and by May 9, General Middleton’s force had arrived at Batoche, the capital

---

79 Ibid., 136.
80 Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*, 238-241.
81 For a more detailed account of the often harrowing fights between Dumont and the Northwest Field Force, see Howard, *Strange Empire*, 444-484. Dumont became a legend in his own time, and eventually joined Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show as a renowned sharpshooter.
of Riel’s nation. Dumont and his warriors held the line at Batoche for three long days, dug in well against Canadian artillery and Gatling guns. It was only on May 12 that the Canadians pierced the Métis line and Riel surrendered himself to Middleton.\(^82\) Dumont escaped south to the United States, and the Métis rebellion ended.

At the same time as Riel and the Métis were fighting Middleton’s Canadian army around Batoche, several Cree bands rose up violently as well. These conflicts, which took place only a few miles west of the Métis at Batoche, were seen by many at the time to be linked with Riel’s uprising. Indeed, the local Cree bands and the Métis had been in communication for some years prior to 1885, and the two groups enjoyed generally friendly relations.\(^83\) Despite these friendly relations, there is little evidence to suggest that the Cree who rose up and attacked white settlement in the Spring of 1885 did so in coordination with the Métis. Rather, it seems most like that they were acting in their own interests, which were quite similar to the Métis, seeking to secure their aboriginal title to land and maintain their independence in the face of impending Canadian settlement.\(^84\)

Nevertheless, Riel and several of the Cree leaders involved in what was now being called the Northwest Resistance were brought to Regina, Saskatchewan, to be tried in the summer of 1885. Riel, whom Prime Minister Macdonald and Ottawa saw as the principal leader of the recent “Indian War” was to be tried for treason, both for his role in the 1885 Resistance and his execution of Thomas Scott at Red River in 1870.\(^85\) In a highly publicized trial in which lawyers debated Riel’s sanity and the justice of the Métis cause, the crown court handed down a conviction of treason to Riel, not for his role in the 1885 Resistance, but for his execution of the.

---

\(^82\) Payment, \textit{Li Gens Libres}, 139.
\(^84\) Ibid., 16-17.
Anglo-Canadian Thomas Scott 15 years earlier. Riel’s was sentenced to death, and despite much public outcry demanding a stay of execution from Prime Minister Macdonald, he was hanged on November 17, 1885.

This series of engagements, along with several Indian fights, whose relation to the Métis struggle are somewhat controversial, constitute what has come to be known as the North West War of 1885. The North West War has come to symbolize an important turning point in Canadian settler nation building, as the “end” of real resistance to the Canadian project. Riel’s highly publicized trial and controversial execution at Regina in 1885 has become one of the most famous court cases in Canadian history. Bruyneel has suggested that Riel’s execution was pivotal to the production of an Anglo-Canadian sovereignty, one that stood at odds with both the Francophone and indigenous elements of Canadian society, at the intersection of which Riel and the Métis stood.

Indeed, the ways in which Canada has memorialized the site of Batoche suggest an understanding of the 1885 Resistance as the “end” of indigeneity and the start of a new Canadian state, one dominated by Anglo settlers. Batoche became a National Historic Site in 1925, with a plaque (in English only) that focused only on the triumphant Canadian victory over the Métis. Diane Payment has shown that this paternalistic narrative of a advanced Canadian state triumphing over a poor, backwards group of Métis, has proved pervasive, and was the official interpretive policy of Parks Canada until at least the 1980s. Others argue that the “official” interpretation of the 1885 Rebellion is still being told by the Canadian government through this lense of a naturalistic, racialized triumph of an advanced white civilization over a backward

---

87 Ibid., 719-720.
88 Payment, Li Gens Libres, 282-83.
89 Ibid., 287-293.
mixed and indigenous one. Undoubtedly, Batoche has become an important site of Canadian nation building, and an important turning point in the settler narratives that pervade Canadian history.

**Conclusion: The “end” of the Métis and renewal after 1885**

The three events which I sketched out are undoubtedly the three most important and memorialized events in Métis national history. Seven Oaks has come to symbolize the “birth” of the Métis as a united people at Red River, while the saga of Louis Riel and his actions at Red River in 1869-70 and at Batoche in 1884-85 represent the “final defeat” of the Métis. In all three of these events the Métis adopted an aggressive, direct style of interacting with the settler state, using force to exact concessions from both the HBC and later the Canadian government, and to show their political autonomy. In this sense, Batoche does represent an end, not of the Métis as a united people, but of an era in Métis political activity.

Since 1885, the Métis have not raised arms against the Canadian government, but this doesn’t mean they have ceased to have a political consciousness. Rather, the Métis have made their history into a battleground, and attempted to reclaim the narrative of the 19th century to fight for their rights. In Chapters 2 and 3, I explore the ways in which the Métis have contested the history of what happened at Batoche in 1885, and through the articulation of a Métis version of events, have sought to retake Batoche as a “site of memory” for the Métis Nation. The battlefield at Batoche has thus remained a site of continuing struggle, over a century after the last bullets were fired.

---

90 David T. Fortin and Justin Surkan, “Toward an Architecture of Métis Resistance, Site Magazine, June 28, 2017; Payment, Li Gens Libres, 294-299; Miller, Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens, 225. Of particular interest in this debate is the architecture of the Batoche Historic Site, including the Interpretive Center opened at Batoche in 1986 and built by the Winnipeg firm IKOY, which (according to the IKOY website) seeks to portray the battle as “the Métis’ last stand as a united people, the end of their independence, and the eventual closing of the Canadian frontier.” From “Batoche Interpretive Center,” IKOY Architects, accessed February 12, 2018, http://www.ikoy.com/.
Chapter 2- Métis Historiography of Batoche 1885-1975

Almost as soon as the bullets stopped flying at Batoche in 1885, another struggle began between the Métis and the settler state over the memory of Batoche. In this ongoing struggle, the Red River Métis and their descendants have attempted to reclaim the narrative of Batoche and Métis history from a settler state which was heavily invested in turning Batoche into a vanishing point for the Métis people and their political independence. By reasserting their history, Métis historians have attempted to articulate a sense of Métis Nationhood, one linked intrinsically to the events that unfolded at Batoche in 1885. Although not completely successful in supplanting the settler narrative of the vanishing Métis at Batoche, the Métis historiography that has emerged since 1885, and particularly between 1935-1975, has helped to create a counternarrative to rival the predominant settler one of erasure, and certainly merits more attention from scholars attempting to study the Métis.

Settler narratives, in this context, are those understandings of history which seek to emphasize the natural and justified progression of non-native settler societies in conjunction with the inevitable, if at times unfortunate, decline of indigenous peoples into obscurity and eventually extinction. Malinda S. Smith, a scholar of Canadian indigenous politics, argues that “hegemonic settler narratives” serve to “narrate indigenous peoples out of the nation,” and place new emphasis (in the Canadian context) on the “foundational role of settler nationalities, notably the French and the English.” When settler historians, both and French and English-speaking, turned Batoche into a vanishing point for the Métis, they subsumed the Métis under precisely these settler narratives, transforming the battle of Batoche into a natural, inevitable occurrence in the grand sweep of settler history.

---

My analysis of Métis historiography relies on the principle that the Métis have resisted these settler narratives and transformed Batoche into a site of memory, a place that has become a “symbolic element of the memorial heritage” of the Métis Nation.\(^92\) By contesting the settler narrative of Batoche, the Métis have turned Batoche into a site of contested memory. Métis historiography should thus be understood as oppositional, created in large part to resist a settler narrative that alternately vilified the Métis as traitors, or reduced them to mere historical caricatures, a primitive people doomed to defeat by a superior Canadian state. By contesting the settler narrative, Métis historians past and present have aimed to reclaim Batoche as a site of their own cultural memory.

To pursue a unified historical narrative at Batoche, Métis historians have also relied on strategic essentialism, a concept introduced by postcolonial scholars such as Spivak, and best articulated in the case of Indigenous peoples by Rachel Buff. Buff argues that indigenous peoples “at strategic moments and in dialogue with imposed hierarchies...construct categories of difference, to generate historical and political coherence."\(^93\)” In other words, Métis historians have not been interested in presenting the history of Batoche in all of its complexity and minutiae, but rather as a means to an end, the end being the maintenance of a Métis national identity that is linked to a shared and continuing history, one centered around Red River, and significantly for the purposes of this study, Batoche, Saskatchewan.

This chapter is primarily structured around the description and analysis of major developments in Métis written commemoration of Batoche since 1885. In this chapter I will focus on the two major published works either written or commissioned by Métis historians and historical societies in the 20th century, A.H. Tremaudan’s *L’Histoire de la nation métisse dans"

\(^93\) Rachel Buff, “Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa,”282
l’Ouest canadien (1935) and Howard Adams’ Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Perspective (1975). My aim in focusing on these two texts in particular is to show how together, they articulate a distinctly Métis vision of history, and are vital to understanding the intellectual foundation which more recent Métis activists and thinkers have relied on in their attempts to reclaim Batoche for the Métis through heritage festivals such as Back to Batoche Days, the largest Métis festival in North America. The articulation of a Métis history at Batoche through writing preceded, and indeed, set the stage for the development of events such as Back to Batoche Days.

Setting the Scene: Early Settler Narratives of Batoche

In the immediate aftermath of the 1885 Rebellion, Anglo-Canadian and French-Canadian writers and politicians seized on the story of the Métis and the tragic fate of their leader Louis Riel to craft a narrative that centered around their respective cultural struggles. For many Anglo-Canadians, especially those living in Ontario, Riel was a treasonous scoundrel, deserving entirely of the fate which befell him, and the Métis were nothing more than a backwards Francophone and indigenous people (ignoring of course the large number of Anglo-Métis people who sided with Riel at Red River and Batoche), rightfully dominated by a superior settler civilization. For French Canadians, Riel and his people’s treatment by the Conservative government of John Macdonald were indicative of the oppressed state of the Francophone and Catholic people of Canada under Anglo rule. These settler narratives appropriated the story of Riel’s Rebellion at Batoche and molded them in order to create an understanding of a national identity for both English and French-speaking Canadians, paying little attention to the protagonists of the story, the Métis Nation.
In the wake of Middleton’s victory at Batoche and the subsequent suppression of the various Indian revolts occurring at the same time in the Northwest, the Anglo-Canadian press was eager to herald the triumphs of Canadian arms, and the courage and bravery of the Canadian soldiers who had, in the eyes of many Anglo-Canadians, defended their country’s honor. Bruyneel has argued that Riel’s execution became imperative to Prime Minister John A. Macdonald’s “Canadian state and nation building.” An examination of several documents produced by Anglo-Canadian newspapers in months and years immediately following Riel’s defeat and execution shows that for many English speakers in the Dominion, the defeat of the Métis at Batoche represented something more than the righteous putting down of traitorous rebels, but an essential piece of creating a English, Protestant Canada in the West.

In July of 1885, just two months after Middleton and his force had finally overpowered Riel and Dumont at Batoche, Arnold Haultain, an Englishman living in Toronto, published “A History of Riel’s Second Rebellion, and How it Was Quelled”, in The Canadian Pictorial and Illustrated War News. This paper had been set up in Toronto in 1885 due to the great demand for news of the war in the North West, and produced 18 issues all concerned with the Métis rebellion on the Saskatchewan. The publication was hugely successful, selling thousands of copies in its limited run.

Haultain’s description of the rebellion, printed in two parts over the months of July and August 1885, seeks to exemplify the honor and sacrifice of the Canadian soldiers who “felt individually responsible for their country’s honor and safety.” He affectionately refers to the returning Canadian veterans as “our boys,” and overall purports to sacrifice the discussion of the

---

complex political causes of the rebellion in favor of a recounting of the bravery and honor of the Canadian military, composed of patriotic citizens, “anxious and willing to defend” their country.\(^{97}\)

Despite his attempts to avoid “politics,” Haultain’s analysis is riddled with details that reveal a great number of assumptions that Anglo-Canadians held about the justice of the Métis cause, and their status as a people, as well as the profound anxiety that the conflict produced within Canada. After arguing that the causes of the war were “difficult to ascertain,” and so complex and hard to identify as to render them uninteresting to the reader, Haultain launches into a racialist screed on the nature of the conflict.\(^{98}\) He argues that much of the war’s causes can be boiled down to the racial hatred that, in his view, “naturally emerges” in a country with citizens of many different ethnicities and religious preferences.\(^{99}\) This racialized view of history, which Haultain seems to have employed deliberately to obscure the real causes of the rebellion, was not an uncommon method for Western writers to discuss conflict in history in the late 19th century. Indeed, only a few years after Haultain wrote this account in 1885, English historian Houston Stewart Chamberlain would publish his seminal work *The Foundations of the 19th Century*, in which he argues that all of history can be seen as a product of conflict and mixing of races, in which superior (read:white) races rightfully should triumph over lesser ones.\(^{100}\) While Chamberlain’s work was concerned primarily with European history, one can see how a historical ideology focused on race and racial conflict would apply rather nicely to a settler narrative such as the one Haultain wrote.

---


\(^{98}\) Ibid., 1.

\(^{99}\) Ibid.

Although Haultain never settles decisively on a cause for the Métis rebellion beyond his opining on the grand historical dialectic between the lesser and greater races, and between savagery and civilization, he does offer his opinions on the “half-breeds” and their way of living throughout the text of his history. Describing the Métis village at Batoche, he presents the Métis as living in a “scattered condition,” and says that “their small log cabins and insignificant farms mutilate the landscape.” Haultain’s emphasis on the unorganized and offensive nature of Métis settlement on the Saskatchewan furthers an aim of presenting the Métis as unfit to live on the land they have settled, as in effect, “bad settlers” in need of order in the form of an Anglo-Canadian land survey and submission to the Canadian government. Haultain further reflects on the unexpected nature of the Métis rebellion, suggesting that the Canadian government and in particular Prime Minister Macdonald were caught totally by surprise by the outbreak of violence and that Macdonald was busily beginning work on the Métis concerns over land survey, in an effort to respond to the many petitions they had sent. This characterization of the conflict as unexpected suggests that the Canadian government harbored no ill will against the Métis, and conveniently ignores the efforts Macdonald had taken in the years following the Manitoba Act to dismantle Métis land rights.

In the end, Haultain’s narrative of the 1885 Rebellion is primarily concerned with an exaltation of the Canadian army, and implied with that, a justification of the aggression and cruelty with which the Canadian government quashed Riel’s rebellion. He does not concern himself with the “tedious” reasons for the rebellion, or the dramatic trial of Riel, or any of the highly charged events of the war and its aftermath. Rather, Haultain chooses to end his account by saying “Suffice it to say that the rebellion was quelled, and we had ‘our boys’ back

---

102 Ibid., 5.
This effort to depoliticize the events of the rebellion, to focus instead on the heroism and duty of the Canadian army, reveals Haultain’s, and the wider Anglo-Canadian press’s, goals in writing about the war. By removing the reasons for the conflict from the history, and focusing on the Canadian army as patriotic heroes, Haultain was attempting to transform Riel’s rebellion from a conflict with multiple and complex causes with very real effects for the Métis of the North West, into a nation-building event, and one which fit well into a settler narrative emphasizing the triumphant march of the settler state, and the retreat of lesser, indigenous races. Indeed, it would fit well into Veracini’s understanding of the settler colonial project, to “extinguish indigenous alterities,” and to “supersede itself (i.e. become ‘settled’).”

While writers such as Haultain and others within the Anglo-Canadian press were reflecting on the defeat of the Métis at Batoche as a nation-building and unifying event, French Canadians in Quebec and the maritime provinces were looking on in horror. French speakers in the east of Canada had taken little interest in the cause of the Métis during the 1869-1870 and 1885 uprisings, but following 1885 fought to incorporate Riel as a martyr of Francophone and Catholic ways of life. In response to Riel’s trial and execution, French writers and journalists sought to incorporate the story of the Métis into their own settler narrative, one which sacrificed Riel and his compatriots’ indigenous identity for an almost uniformly French and Catholic one, and which used Riel as a symbol of the oppressed status of French Catholics in an Anglo-Protestant-dominated Canada.

Following Riel’s conviction and sentencing to hanging, French Canadians protested the Crown’s decision furiously. An international Francophone campaign was launched to save Riel.

---

from the noose and gain a pardon from the Prime Minister and the Queen. Macdonald flatly refused to pardon Riel, saying emphatically, that “He shall hang though every dog in Quebec bark in his favor.” Macdonald’s obstinacy provoked outrage in Quebec, with massive street demonstrations being held in Montreal. Even in parliament, a debate raged, where Wilfrid Laurier, later a Prime Minister of Canada himself, stood up in the House of Commons to flatly condemn the conduct of the Canadian government in their treatment of the Métis and defend the character of Louis Riel, an act which would help establish Laurier as one of Canada’s great political orators.

Yet the concern of the French Canadian public with Riel’s cause lay not with the struggle of an indigenous people against a settler state, but rather the suppression of one settler identity by another. In an anonymous pamphlet released in 1885 or 1886 and widely circulated among French Canadians at the time, titled “Le chef Métis sacrifié aux Orangistes (the Métis chief sacrificed to the Orangemen),” the author makes the case for a grand conspiracy to evict the Francophone Métis from their land, and called on the French Canadian electorate to prevent Macdonald and the Conservative government from ever again being able to so oppress the rights of the French and Catholic populations of Canada. Setting up a dichotomy between the “anglais protestants” and the “Canadiens Français” as two great opposing forces struggling over the control of the direction of Canada, the pamphlet represents a text of French Canadian nationalism more than anything else, into which the Métis are incorporated on the side of the French. Of course this appropriation of the Métis struggle ignores the large numbers of English-speaking Métis who had stood with Riel at both Red River and Batoche, but to make

---

106 Quoted in Weinstein, *Quiet Revolution West*, 15.
such a distinction would weaken the strength of a narrative that relied on the French and Catholic aspects of Riel’s identity.

Another pamphlet, also printed in 1885 in the aftermath of Riel’s dramatic conviction and execution and titled “Le Mort de Riel et La Voix de Sang” (The Death of Riel and the Voice of Blood), sought to more explicitly make a case for a French nationalism in Canada, calling together Riel and all French speakers in the Dominion to come together as one against the Anglo-Protestant, Orangemen foes. Written by “a committee of collaborators,” the authors of this pamphlet argue that “we have one goal, to unite all French Canadians under one and the same flag.” They go on to write that, with the death of Riel and the defeat of the Métis cause, “the cord that strangled him is strangling and gagging the Province of Quebec.” This fiery language shows that for the French Canadian nationalists, Riel was a symbol principally of their struggle, and this motivated them to argue for a solidarity movement among all French and Catholic peoples, notably leaving “les sauvages,” the indigenous peoples out of the conversation. Indeed, this pamphlet set out a mission to unite French speakers, and in the General Election of 1886 the Quebec nationalist party gained a majority in Quebec for the first time, firmly supplanting the Conservatives and, seemingly, sparking a French nationalist sentiment in Canadian politics.

In the first real history of the Métis rebellion written from a French Canadian perspective, this French nationalist ideology comes across as well, albeit with a great deal of sympathy extended to the Métis cause in Western Canada. In 1889, Adolphe Ouimet, a French Canadian lawyer based in Montreal, published La Verité sur la Question Métisse au Nord-Ouest (The

---

109 “Voix” here literally translates to “voice” but may be better translated as “Ties”, and is meant to convey the common roots of Riel and other French Canadians, as part of one great French family in North America.
111 Ibid., 4.
112 Weinstein, Quiet Revolution West, 15-16.
Truth of the Métis Question in the North West), a history largely derived from interviews with the great Métis military leader Gabriel Dumont, at that time still living in exile in the United States and touring with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Despite the fact that much of the history relied on Dumont’s testimony, Ouimet’s argument in the opening and closing chapters of his book show that he too was vested in the Métis primarily as symbols for the French Canadian struggle. Ouimet presented the suppression of the 1885 rebellion at Batoche as part of a larger conspiracy within Anglo-Canadian society to “abolish the French language, and to take our Province [Quebec] by force of arms.”

By placing the Métis struggle within this larger context of Francophone suppression, Ouimet and other French Canadian writers and thinkers again created a settler narrative around Batoche, if one rather different from the English. In this narrative, indigeneity was erased, replaced by a uniformly French and Catholic identity. French writers therefore transformed the Métis of Batoche from an indigenous nation into one small piece of a grand French Canadian, Catholic nation, one in which European aspects of identity were to be prized over indigenous ones.

For both the English and French-speaking populations of Eastern Canada, the plight of the Métis and the story of Batoche became tools for the advancement of various settler projects. For the English, as exemplified by writers such as Haultain, the 1885 Rebellion was a nation-building event, one in which the Canadian people had come together to defeat a common enemy, whose reasons for rebelling weren’t really important, or at the very least highly unjustified. For the French pamphleteers and historians such as Adolphe Ouimet, the Métis and their suppression symbolized a far greater struggle over whether Canada should be English and Protestant, or French and Catholic. In both of these settler narratives, however, the Métis were removed as

---

113 Adolphe Ouimet, La Verité sur la Question Métisse au Nord-Ouest (Montreal: 1889), 4-5.
agents of their own history, and their reasons for rebelling against a predatory settler state were obscured. It was in this context that Métis historians chose to write back against the settler narrative, to attempt to tell their side of the story and regain control of Batoche as a site of memory.

**L’Union Nationale Métisse Saint Josephe du Manitoba**

In the years following the 1885 Rebellion, as English- and French-speaking Canadians in the east of the country quarrelled over Riel’s legacy and attempted to incorporate the Métis struggle into their own narratives of settler nationalism, the Métis who had fought with Riel and Dumont at Batoche fought to reclaim the narrative of the 1885 Rebellion and to return Batoche as a site of memory for the Métis Nation, rather than one belonging to settler society. In this section, I examine the early history of one of the organizations the Métis set up in order to write their history of Batoche, L’Union national métisse Saint-Josephe du Manitoba (also sometimes referred to as the National Métis Union). This organization was set up in 1887 near Winnipeg by relatives and former associates of Riel, with the goal of restoring a sense of Métis national identity that Riel had tried to imbue in his people. One of the main methods through which they attempted to create (or perhaps recreate) this sense of national identity was through a textual remembering of the 1885 Rebellion and the Battle of Batoche, one that came directly contradicted the emergent settler narratives discussed in the section above. Culminating in 1935 with the publication of A-H. de Tremaudan’s *Histoire de la nation métisse dans l’Ouest canadien*, l’Union made every effort in the 50 years following Batoche to rewrite the story of Riel and Dumont, by creating a narrative countermemory that placed Batoche and the 1885 Resistance as its central fixture and a rallying point for continuing Métis activism.
In the years following Batoche, Métis material conditions deteriorated quickly. For all the talk of men such as Wilfrid Laurier and other French Canadians in government, they did little to arrest the rapid reduction of Métis land title in the Canadian West. The Canadian government, as it had done in Manitoba since 1870, promised the Métis in Saskatchewan their land, and then handed individual landowners “Half-breed scrip,” certificates that granted them either the title to their land or monetary compensation for it.\textsuperscript{114} In reality, Canadian officials frequently did their best to slow down the process by which the Métis were able to gain their land, and more often than not, Métis landowners were forced to sell their scrip to prospectors for a pitance.\textsuperscript{115} It was during this time, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, that the Métis became known as the “Road Allowance People,” who lived “on the fringes...wandering from job to job and destitute.”\textsuperscript{116} Already robbed of much of their material prosperity, the final insult came in 1906 when the Canadian government officially removed the designation “half-breed” from the Canadian census, erasing the Métis population from official government documentation.\textsuperscript{117}

It was in this context that the National Métis Union arose, with a desire to rewrite Métis history in order to emphasize the continued presence of the Métis Nation in Canada. After being founded in 1887 in St. Vital, Manitoba, the Union quickly set to work presenting a Métis narrative of the 1885 Rebellion. In 1891, the Union and their Historical Committee, set up for the sole purpose of celebrating Métis history, dedicated a monument to Louis Riel in the cemetery of St. Boniface, Manitoba where Riel had been buried.\textsuperscript{118} Another goal of the Historical Committee was to write a history of the 1885 Rebellion, a “recital of the ‘true facts’ to counter the

\textsuperscript{114} Hogue, \textit{The Métis and the Medicine Line}, 183.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 186.
\textsuperscript{117} Dubois and Saunders, “Explaining the Resurgence of Métis Rights,”: 49.
slanderous accounts of the enemies of the Métis, whose only purpose had been to vindicate the
governments of the day.”

The history that the Métis Union ended up producing would not be published until 1935,
but its research and preparation would require years of research and interviews with surviving
members of the rebellion, including Gabriel Dumont. When it was finally published, this Métis
history, written by a French Canadian lawyer and journalist named A-H. de Tremaudan, and
titled *Histoire de la nation métisse de l’Ouest canadien*, would represent an important work in an
emerging Métis historiography. Tremaudan’s work set out to challenge directly the settler
narratives surrounding the cause of the 1885 Rebellion and the standing of men such as Riel and
Dumont in the Canadian public eye.

After years of collecting information on the history of the Métis Nation, the Historical
Committee recruited Tremaudan in 1924 to compile a history of the Métis of Red River and their
descendants. Tremaudan had written extensively already about the Riel rebellion and the history
of the Métis, and he was sympathetic to their cause. After several years of writing, Tremaudan
finished his manuscript in 1928, but before he could edit it to the satisfaction of the Historical
Committee, he died in Los Angeles, California. The Committee undertook the editing process
of his book, and after heavy revisions, published it under his name in 1935, more than six years
after he had died, and with significant changes to the text. Although the work was published
50 years after the last shots were fired at Batoche, the research and that went into the book can be
traced to around the same time, in the last decade of the 19th and first decade of the 20th
centuries, when men such as Haultain and his contemporaries were ruminating on the conflict.

---

119 Ens and Sawchuk, *From New Peoples to New Nations*, 118.
120 Ibid., 120-122.
121 Ibid., 123.
122 Ibid., 124.
The work can thus be seen as a blending of Tremaudan’s sympathetic outsider perspective with a very real Métis nationalist one, incorporating the views and thinking of the leaders of the Historical Committee.

Tremaudan’s work is primarily concerned with creating a narrative that vindicates the Métis actions in the past and gives them agency in their history. The author aims to show that the Métis are a distinct nation in Canada, who played a vital role in the settlement of the western part of the country, and whose actions in 1885 were not only just, but provoked by a tyrannical government bent on their destruction. Tremaudan’s narrative centers not on racialist grand narratives, focused on dialectics between different racial, religious, or national identities, but rather on the specific events of Métis history, by emphasizing that the events of 1885 were highly avoidable, and that it was only through the aggression and criminal negligence of the Canadian government that the Métis reluctantly took up arms.

Tremaudan starts the work by describing the origins of the Métis Nation at Red River in the 19th century. He writes that the Métis are the products of both Indians and Whites, and that they bear the characteristics of both their progenitors. Tremaudan describes the Indians who bore the Métis as “lacking nothing,” and justified in the defense of their land against a foreign, settling invader. This praise of the characteristics of the indigenous peoples of Canada, and a sympathetic understanding of their fight to defend their land against European invaders, reflects a different view of the past than that adopted in settler narratives of indigenous peoples, which tend to focus on the natural, predetermined state of affairs between a civilized European state and

---

123 For the purposes of simplicity, I will refer to Tremaudan as the sole author of the text throughout my analysis of it, but keep in mind that the work was the product of both Tremaudan and the Historical Committee writing in his name.

a savage indigenous people. This was, after all, an era when much of academic history in North America was being written with Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis in mind.

Tremaudan further argues that the Métis Nation which emerged from Indian and White marriages retained characteristics of both, but remained independent of either culture or nationality.\(^\text{125}\) This line of reasoning directly confronts the Métis erasure that the Canadian government had carried out since the end of the 1885 Rebellion. This erasure was present in both the rhetoric and policy of the Canadian government, with John Macdonald famously arguing in 1886 that the “Half-Breeds” did not really exist as a nation in and of themselves, stating that “if they are Indians, they go with the tribe; if they are half-breeds they are white, and they stand in exactly the same relation to the Hudson’s Bay Company and Canada as if they were altogether white.”\(^\text{126}\) This erasure of the Métis identity by the Canadian government culminated in their removal from the 1906 census, relegating them to a status that was neither Indian nor White, but not deserving of any governmental recognition. Tremaudan’s emphasis that the Métis who formed a Nation in the 19th century were not just racially mixed Whites or Indians focused on their distinctiveness and independence from the binary categories that men such as Macdonald would push them into.

Tremaudan goes on to make the case that this culturally and politically autonomous people, the Métis Nation, had served as forerunners to the settlement of the North-West. Tremaudan argues that the Métis should “hold high their heads” and bear their national identity with pride.\(^\text{127}\) This was certainly a response to the Anglo-settler narrative, as we saw with Haultain, that the Métis were unfit settlers of the Canadian West, who had no valuable role in settlement. Haultain had after all described the Métis method of settlement as “scattered” and

\(^\text{125}\) Tremaudan, *Hold High Your Heads*, 7.
\(^\text{126}\) Quoted in Weinstein, *Quiet Revolution West*, 16.
\(^\text{127}\) Tremaudan, *Hold High Your Heads*, 18.
having “mutilated the landscape,” suggesting that they were in need of correction by the Canadian government. Tremaudan flips this narrative on its head, arguing that instead, the Métis settlement of the West acted as a vital conduit that allowed Anglo-Canadian settlers to come to the region. Tremaudan thus places the Métis in the center of the narrative of the settlement of North America by Europeans, and could thus be seen to subvert it, by placing an indigenous people as crucial to westward settlement. This complicates the settler narrative of indigenous erasure, but also perhaps suggests that Tremaudan never really saw the Métis as truly indigenous.

Tremaudan’s placement of the Métis at the center of a narrative of Canadian settlement reflects perhaps his own French Canadian perspective on Métis history. Tremaudan never describes the Métis as an indigenous people, and although he does refer to the Métis as a nation, he still places them within the context of a larger settler Canadian history. This could have been a conscious choice by Tremaudan and the Historical Committee to make a relatable story for the larger Canadian public, for whom settler narratives were very familiar. It could also suggest, however, that despite his sympathy for the Métis cause, Tremaudan remained steeped in a Euro-Canadian intellectual tradition, the same one that produced the works of Haultain and Ouimet.

When he comes to the causes of the 1885 Rebellion, Tremaudan argues that the Métis who settled in the Saskatchewan country after 1870 sought “freedom” and a system of their own land enclosure, and that both of these had been denied them in Manitoba after the Manitoba Act. He further describes that the Métis had exercised every method they could to peacefully resolve their conflict with the Canadian government over their land title in Saskatchewan. The Métis sent petition after petition, but Tremaudan notes that “they remained unanswered.”

---

128 Tremaudan, *Hold High Your Heads*, 112.
129 Ibid., 115.
Tremaudan presents Canada as intentionally negligent, “as if set on discouraging these petitioners whose persistence was beginning to irritate.”\footnote{Tremaudan, \textit{Hold High Your Heads}, 116.}

Tremaudan further vindicates and tempers Riel, presenting him not as the treasonous madman of Anglo-Canadian discourse, but rather as a calm statesman, motivated solely by the love of his people and a desire for justice. Tremaudan writes that Riel used “moderate language” when talking to his people about their struggle with the government, and encouraged them to patience and to have faith in the Canadian government to respond in time to their petitions.\footnote{Ibid., 118.} This shows Riel as a peaceful diplomat, interested in working with the settler state if possible, and not as an anti-colonial militant. When the time for war eventually came, Tremaudan presents Riel as incredibly reluctant to go to war, and that “the idea of armed resistance was not to his liking,” but that “the spirit of sacrifice for the greater good of the majority overcame all thought of safety for himself and his family.”\footnote{Ibid., 120.} Historians Gerhard Ens and Joe Sawchuk cast this description of Riel as “hagiographic,” rather than concerned with “historical fact” and that this is what gives Tremaudan’s work “its emotional weight.”\footnote{Ens and Sawchuk, \textit{From New Peoples to New Nations}, 123.}

Indeed, it is hard to read Tremaudan’s work and not feel something for the Métis people, led by the intrepid Dumont and Riel, as they fought against impossible odds. Tremaudan highlights the tactical brilliance of Dumont, holding off General Middleton’s Field Force at the Battle of Fish Creek despite being outnumbered 10-1.\footnote{Tremaudan, \textit{Hold High Your Heads}, 132-133.} When describing the events of the Battle of Batoche, Tremaudan describes Dumont and Riel in heroic terms, showcasing examples of their bravery on the field and in holding their people together in the last days of the
struggle. When the time came to surrender, we see Riel and Dumont as resigned to their fate, with Dumont saying to his leader, “You knew when we took up arms that we’d be beaten.”

This characterization of Dumont and Riel as men who took a huge risk in fighting a war, knowing that they would be beaten, precludes us from understanding them as foolish or brash. Rather, as Tremaudan argues later, the risk was a supremely calculated one. Tremaudan writes that Riel “the demonstration of the Métis and their allies, no matter how futile, would have a valuable result. The Canadian government...would have to see the truth and adopt measures to remedy the lamentable situation of native peoples in the West.” Riel is thus cast as a martyr for the greater good, and the Métis rebellion as a sacrifice for a better future.

In the last pages of the book, which was written last and thus likely the most heavily doctored section by the Historical Committee, Tremaudan gives an overview of the present state of the Métis. He argues that although many Métis have been forced to assimilate into white society, “they have kept tradition alive.” He goes on to say that “the Métis Nation is not dead, for its roots are enduring,” emphasizing that although the Canadian government erased Métis identity as best they could, the Métis still possessed a sense of collective identity and nationalism. In the last lines of the book, Tremaudan makes a dramatic claim that “[Métis] history is worthy of a place in the glorious annals of the history of the world.”

Although most academic historians do not consider it to be a particularly well researched book worthy of further scrutiny, Tremaudan’s account was successful in conveying its main goal, that Métis history was worthy of remembering, and that the Métis Nation was a distinct

---

136 Ibid., 138.
137 Ibid., 142.
138 Ibid., 163.
139 Ibid., 164.
140 Ibid., 165.
group with a history that included their fight against the Canadian government at Batoche, and that even though they had been beaten there, the Métis Nation endured. Ens and Sawchuk point out that, although most academic historians prefer to place Marcel Giraud’s *The Métis in the Canadian West*, published just a few years after Tremaudan, as a starting point for contemporary historiography on the Métis, Tremaudan’s work has always been more widely read among the general population. Indeed, Tremaudan’s work has been published in more editions, and its first English translation appeared several years before Giraud’s work was translated. They suggest that it is precisely because of Tremaudan’s factual errors and hagiographic style, his ability to “present a narrative that has relevancy to today’s struggles,” that his work has proved so enduring. Indeed, the National Métis Union put much effort into spreading Tremaudan’s work as far as they could, raising thousands of dollars in the midst of the Great Depression to ensure its publication and circulation. Tremaudan’s work is no doubt unique as a history told from an indigenous perspective and written and published in the early decades of the 20th century, and as such certainly warrants greater attention as a document of historical memory, in spite, or perhaps precisely because, of its few academic bona fides.

**Activism and the re-emergence of Métis Nationalism in the 1960s**

After the publication of Tremaudan’s *Histoire* in 1935, the Métis largely continued to be Canada’s “forgotten people.” Despite the fact that many Métis still had a sense of a cohesive national identity, Métis material conditions continued to decline, and they continued to be considered the “Road Allowance People.” This ongoing state of affairs prompted a new political activism among the Métis, distinct from the early efforts of organizations such as the National Métis Union. This new movement was grounded in grassroots organizing and socialist thinking.

---

141 Ens and Sawchuk, *From New Peoples to New Nations*, 127.
142 Ibid., 128.
143 Ibid., 129.
and would come, in the 1960s, to be heavily influenced by both the Black Power and Red Power movements. This new wave of radical political organizing among the Métis gave rise to a new wave of Métis historiography, one influenced by Marxist paradigms and best espoused by the legendary Métis leader and scholar Howard Adams in his 1975 book *Prison of Grass*.

In the 1930s, Canada was in the throes of a global economic depression, and the Métis, the majority of whom were already living in poverty, were bending under the strain of socio-economic hardship. Out of this environment, new Métis political organizations sprung up, led by young socialist activists such as Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady. These leaders fomented an activist spirit among the Métis of the West by traveling to “isolated communities throughout the prairies to discuss the possibility of building a better life for their people.” New Métis organizations in the West were now greatly concerned with gaining a land base for the Métis, as many had been forced to spend the intervening years since the defeat at Batoche squatting on public land. Early efforts in the 1930s were promising, and under the leadership of left-wing activists such as Norris and Brady, Métis societies in Alberta and Saskatchewan succeeded in gaining something akin to a land base, in the form of “Métis settlements,” areas of land to which the provincial government gave the Métis 90 year leases.

Following the Second World War, John Weinstein has argued that Métis political organizations in the provinces had trouble advancing their goals of economic betterment and self-government due to internal divisions and the exploitation of these divisions by provincial governments. Socialist activists like Norris and Brady were increasingly marginalized as the more conservative provincial governments preferred to deal with other Métis organizations who

---

144 Dubois and Saunders, “Explaining the Resurgence,” 52.
145 Ibid., 53.
did not have left-wing political affiliations.\textsuperscript{147} This state of affairs put Métis political activism in a bind that would last until the 1960s.

Starting in the early 1960s however, a new wave of radical Métis nationalism spread through the Prairie Provinces, and nowhere was it more pronounced than in Saskatchewan, where Batoche and all the memories of 1885 lay. Saskatchewan had a long history of radical organizing, and in 1933 had been the site of the founding of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, a political party which in their founding manifesto “promised to eradicate capitalism” in favor of a Marxist welfare state.\textsuperscript{148} This history certainly informed the radical brand of Métis activism that would emerge in Saskatchewan. In 1965, Malcolm Norris and Jim Brady founded the Métis Association of Saskatchewan, organized along radical lines that the provincial government in Saskatchewan came to associate with communism.\textsuperscript{149} At the same time that Norris and Brady were organizing their Association, representing Métis principally in the northern part of Saskatchewan, Joe Amyotte and Alex Daniels set up the Métis Society of Saskatchewan, which represented Métis living in the southern part of the province. The Métis Society and the Métis Association differed in more than just geography however; the Métis Society was much more conservative than the Métis Association, and in general tended to support the conservative provincial government led by Ross Thatcher.\textsuperscript{150}

The Thatcher government at first used this to their advantage, attempting to drive a wedge between the two organizations by principally supporting the Métis Society and shunning as best they could Norris and the more left-wing Métis Association. In 1967, the Métis Society and the Métis Association merged under the leadership of the more conservative Amyotte, and

\textsuperscript{147} Weinstein, \textit{Quiet Revolution West}, 28.
\textsuperscript{149} Pitsula, “The Thatcher Government in Saskatchewan,” 220.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 222-223.
the new group retained the name of the Métis Society of Saskatchewan. Soon after this merger, Malcolm Norris died, and as James Pitsula has noted, “the way was clear for the Thatcher government to have a comfortable relationship with the Métis Society.” It was this environment that Howard Adams stepped into in 1968.

Adams was a Métis man from Saskatchewan who had gone south to the United States to earn a PhD from the University of California-Berkeley in the early 1960s. While there he was exposed to the student organizing against the Vietnam War, as well as revolutionary thought, such as the works of Che Guevarra, Franz Fanon, and the Black Panthers. Adams returned to Saskatchewan in the late 1960s, determined to fight for his people. Adams quickly organized a new leftist Métis group in Saskatchewan, called the Saskatchewan Native Action Committee (SNAC) that handed out militant leaflets condemning the government’s attempt to “integrate” the Métis into white society.

By 1969, Adams had folded his organization into the Métis Society and taken over the leadership of it himself. In the years that followed, the Métis Society would become the most radical of the provincial Métis organizations, espousing a Marxist and anti-colonial doctrine that was not dissimilar from the rhetoric used by the Black Panthers. In fact, it was in no small part due to the efforts of Howard Adams that Fred Hampton, leader of the Chicago chapter of the Black Panthers, came to speak at the University of Saskatchewan’s Regina Campus (where Adams was a professor) in 1969. Although Adams was eventually ousted from his position as president of the Métis Society in 1971, his successor Jim Sinclair, a close friend of Adams, continued to articulate a leftist ideology. It was also during this time that, in 1972, the Métis

---

152 Ibid., 223.
153 Weinstein, Quiet Revolution West, 30.
Society of Saskatchewan joined forces with the various Non-Status Indian bands of the province, to create the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan (AMNSIS).\textsuperscript{155} It was in this context of radical Métis nationalism and grassroots political activism that Adams would write his great history of the Métis, \textit{Prison of Grass}, in 1975, which combined a Marxist paradigm of history with the distinctly anti-colonial sentiment that was already present to a certain degree in the earlier work put out by Tremaudan and the National Métis Union.

\textbf{\textit{Prison of Grass} and a Marxist articulation of Métis History}

Adams’ approach to Métis history differed significantly from the major historical works on the 1885 Rebellion that had been written since the Historical Committee published Tremaudan’s \textit{Histoire} in 1935. These works bear mentioning, not only for their significance to scholars today who study the Métis, but also to show the academic environment of Métis Studies within which and against which Adams was writing when he penned \textit{Prison of Grass}. The two principle works written by non-Métis scholars in the mid-20th century that have proved particularly influential are the French historian Marcel Giraud’s \textit{The Métis in the Canadian West} (1945) and the American journalist, novelist, and literary critic Joseph Kinsey Howard’s \textit{Strange Empire} (1952).

Giraud’s work is often cited as foundational to the modern study of Métis history and culture. In a retrospective in 1994, historian Vaughan Baker referred to Giraud’s work on the Métis as “groundbreaking.”\textsuperscript{156} In a review of a translated edition of Giraud’s book, published in 1986, scholar Nancy J. Christie writes that Giraud laid “the groundwork for later studies of the

\textsuperscript{155} Non-Status Indians in Canada refers to those First Nations people who identify as native but have no treaties with the Canadian government, and thus don’t qualify as having federal “status.”

Indeed, in 1985, a group of scholars held a Métis Studies conference in honor of the French scholar Giraud, out of which came one of the definitive works of Métis Studies in the late 20th Century. Giraud’s work on the Métis is regarded by many within the academy as the first seminal work of scholarship on the Métis, ignoring of course Tremaudan’s work, published a decade earlier.

Joseph Kinsey Howard’s *Strange Empire*, published in 1952, has enjoyed perhaps a less exalted status in the academy than Giraud, but has come to be seen by many scholars of the Métis as similarly foundational. Prominent Métis scholar Heather Devine has described Howard’s research methods in writing *Strange Empire* as “decades ahead of their time, both conceptually and methodologically,” although she does qualify that Howard was “not completely free from the entrenched ethnocentrism of the times.” Michel Hogue, who recently completed a study of the Plains Métis and their relationship to the US-Canada border, credits Howard with being the first scholar of the Métis to focus on their history as transnational, not limited by the boundaries of settler states.

Adams’ work came out of a context in which academic historians had developed a historiography on the Métis, with both Giraud and Howard as foundational authors, but also one in which Marxist politics and revolutionary rhetoric had come to the fore in public discourse. In the preface to his own history of the Métis, Adams makes no reference to either Howard or Giraud. Indeed, the only secondary scholar whom Adams directly cites in the preface is Tremaudan and the Métis Historical Committee, whom he credits with accumulating a “mass of

---

158 The work to which I am referring is Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1986). The introduction to this book features a lengthy retrospective on the importance of Giraud’s research to contemporary Métis studies, and lauds his achievements in laying the groundwork for contemporary Métis scholarship.
159 Devine, “Ahead of His Time,”57.
writings, letters, and official documents...of the people actually involved with the revolt [of 1885].”

Thus Adams makes a direct connection between his own writing and the previous efforts of Métis historians and institutions to write the history of Batoche. Further, Adams lays out the ideological framework for his study, emphasizing a focus on the “economics of imperialism” and the “cultural, historical, and psychological aspects of colonialism for Indians and Métis.” He goes on to state that in his book, “Racism and colonization are analysed as both subjective and objective conditions in order to show how imperialism operates to conquer and colonize Indians and Métis, while seizing their land and resources at the same time.” In his focus on the psychological effects of colonialism, Adams was clearly influenced by Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* and other foundational works of anti-colonial and post-colonial scholarship that emerged in the 1960s.

Adams’ work is thus a synthesis of Marxist, anti-colonial thinking with an established Métis narrative of history, that reflects well the prevailing political leanings of the major Métis political organizations of the 1960s and 1970s. His book is not purely a history of the Métis and especially the 1885 Resistance, but also a political manifesto in which he reflects on the current state of Métis rights and articulate a distinctive ideology of Métis nationalism rooted in Marxist and anti-colonial struggle. As such, contemporary political concerns inform Adams’ understanding of the events of the 1885 Rebellion, perhaps even more clearly than they did the National Métis Union and Tremaudan.

---

162 Ibid., x.
163 Ibid., xi.
164 Adams includes a reading list at the end of *Prison of Grass*, in which he lists such significant leftist and Third-World scholars of the 1960s such as Fanon, Nkrumah, Memmi, and Goshal, as well as Red Power writers such as Vine Deloria, Jr.
In his chapter concerning the causes of the 1885 Rebellion, Adams immediately decents Riel from his narrative. He writes that referring to the 1885 Rebellion as “Riel’s Rebellion” is dangerously inaccurate, and in fact a product of Canadian propaganda designed to scapegoat the Métis and their leader as violent seditionists.\(^{166}\) Instead, Adams characterizes the political activism that spawned the 1885 Rebellion as a vast populist workers movement, composed of Métis and Indian people, who in Adams’ eyes are Canada’s “true” proletariat.\(^{167}\) He again emphasizes the peaceful and constitutional nature of this resistance movement, citing the number of unanswered petitions that the people of the North-West sent to Ottawa, and arguing that it was the Canadian government, not Riel and the Métis, who were the aggressors.\(^{168}\) Showing his leftist politics, Adams argues that “Riel was working for the North-West people’s movement, not leading it,” and, again emphasizing Riel’s peaceful intentions, says that he “tried to persuade the Métis people to avoid violence.”\(^{169}\) Adams thus recreates the narrative that Tremaudan and the Historical Committee constructed decades earlier, but informs this national narrative with a Marxist and revolutionary ideology.

This application of radical revolutionary thought to the history of the 1885 Rebellion becomes especially pronounced when Adams details the events of the Battle of Batoche. Classifying Dumont as an expert in “guerrilla warfare,” Adams gleefully recounts the ease with which the Métis defeated the much larger Canadian military force, which Adams characterizes as imperialist invaders.\(^{170}\) Saying that the Métis fought “only to protect their homes,” Adams describes Dumont and his small army as “native warriors.”\(^{171}\) This application of the term

---

\(^{166}\) Adams, *Prison of Grass*, 76.
\(^{167}\) Ibid., 80-81.
\(^{168}\) Ibid., 87.
\(^{169}\) Ibid., 88.
\(^{170}\) Ibid., 103.
\(^{171}\) Ibid., 105.
“guerrilla warfare” and an emphasis on the nobility of the Métis warriors in defending their homes against imperialist invaders shows Adams’ influences, notably Che Guevara, whose *Manual on Guerrilla Warfare* Adams had first read while a doctoral student at Berkeley.\(^{172}\)

All in all, Adams’ account of the history of the Métis and in particular the history of the 1885 War reframes the Métis narrative of history first developed by Tremaudan and the Historical Committee in a revolutionary lense, inspired by the anti-colonial and Marxist thinkers of the 1960s. His writing reflects a consistent understanding of Métis nationalism, but also one that is dynamic and changing through time. Adams wrote his book in 1975 with a Métis audience in mind, writing in his chapter on white schooling of natives that “The school systematically and meticulously conditions natives to a state of inferiorization and colonization,” and that it does this by teaching “the language, literature, and history of the colonizer...forcing students to deny their...essential being.”\(^{173}\) *Prison of Grass* should thus be seen as an effort to resist this colonization that Adams saw, particularly in the teaching of history. Adams creates a narrative that relies on an essentialist understanding of Métis identity and that emphasized the heroism and justness of the rebels in 1885.

As Adams was writing *Prison of Grass*, however, the Métis began in earnest to attempt to reclaim the physical site of Batoche. In 1970, while Adams was still president of the then-Métis Society of Saskatchewan, the first Back to Batoche Days was announced, a massive Métis heritage festival to be held at the most important site in Métis history. From the 1970s, the Métis would assert their presence at Batoche each year, and there articulate a sense of Métis identity and history, consequently reclaiming the physical site of Batoche as a Métis space. Through

Back to Batoche Days, the Métis would articulate a sense of nationhood and ownership of Batoche as a physical and psychological site of memory.

**Conclusion: Métis Historiography and Setting the Stage for Back to Batoche**

From the earliest days after the 1885 conflict, a struggle over the narrative of what happened at Batoche and why it happened began. For settlers, the reasons the Métis had for resisting the settler state were erased, and the Métis were absorbed into a larger narrative over a distinct national and cultural struggle within Canada. In response to this erasure, Métis historians, and historians writing for the Métis, wrote back, culminating first with Trémaudan’s *l’Histoire* in 1935, and later followed by Howard Adams’ *Prison of Grass* in 1975. Both these books are distinct products of the political environments in which they were written, with Adams’ work in particular reflecting the radical revolutionary thought of the 1960s. Yet these works maintained a distinctly Métis interpretation of the events of Batoche, as evidenced by Adams’ generous citing of Trémaudan’s work, even though the members of the Métis Union were not radical Marxists like Adams.

The distinctly Métis historiography that Trémaudan and Adams articulated in their scholarship was rooted in the justice of the Métis cause against the Canadian state, and its continued relevance. Susan Miller has argued that indigenous paradigms in history invoke “indigenous narratives that contradict state hegemonies” and lay out “historical matter that tribes can use to pursue their national interests.”174 This is certainly the case for the Métis, as the next chapter aims to reveal. The development of a Métis intellectual and written tradition about the history of Batoche informed the thinking of many Métis in the later 20th century. In 1970, under Howard Adams’ brief presidency, the Métis Society of Saskatchewan hosted the first annual Back to Batoche Days, a heritage festival whose purpose was to help Métis people understand

---

174 Miller, “Native Historians Write Back,” 40.
Batoche as a “link with the past, a part of our history that we know and understand.” Jim Sinclair, Howard Adams’ protege and successor as president of the Métis Society, put it in more forceful terms in 1973, when he claimed in a radio interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) that “We demand that Batoche be given to the Métis” as a reparation for the crimes the Canadian army committed at Batoche. This forceful articulation of a Métis vision of what happened at Batoche was inspired in no small part by the efforts of Métis historians such as the Historical Committee (with assistance from Trémaudan) and Howard Adams, under whose leadership the Métis returned to Batoche.

It would be through the heritage festival Back to Batoche Days that the Métis interpretation of history at Batoche would see its most public and immediate articulation in the years following 1970. The next chapter, then, focuses on this heritage festival and the ways in which Métis activists and participants at Back to Batoche have used the event as a means of restating Métis history and reclaiming their historic capital.

---

Chapter 3-Back to Batoche: Métis Efforts to Regain the Site, 1970-2018

In 1971, an editorial in *New Breed Magazine*, a periodical put out by the Métis Society of Saskatchewan and named after a newspaper Louis Riel had started for the Métis in the 19th century, invited Métis from all over the province and the Western Plains to come to a heritage festival at the battlefield site of Batoche. The author of the piece, whose name was not listed, exhorted Métis to come to Batoche to celebrate the past and the future of the Métis Nation, writing that “from the old comes the new, and so it is with the Métis people today. From the ashes of the old, we will rebuild the new. Come back to Batoche. We will rebuild.”177 The festival in question, Back to Batoche Days, was only in its second year, yet from this editorial we can begin to understand already the incredible significance that the festival held for its organizers, the leaders of the Métis Society of Saskatchewan, many of whom were disciples of Howard Adams.178 In this chapter, we will principally explore this dual nature of Back to Batoche Days as a heritage festival that is at once a forum for the telling of a distinctly Métis history, as well as a Métis nation-building and community-building event.

Back to Batoche Days can be understood as having three distinct components, each of which is carried out each year to constitute the complete festival. Since 1971, Back to Batoche Days has featured in its first two days, the annual meeting of the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan.179 This event, during which the MNS elects new leadership and passes legislation affecting Métis people in Saskatchewan, serves as an important method for the Métis to reclaim their ancestral capital through recentering their political activities there, as well as articulate a distinct vision of their history. Following this annual meeting, the main portion of Back to

178 This includes Adams’ protege and successor as President of the Métis Society, Jim Sinclair.
179 This organization has been known alternatingly as the Métis Society of Saskatchewan (1967-72), the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan (AMNSIS) (1972-1987), The Métis Society of Saskatchewan again (1987-1993), before settling on its current name in 1987.
Batoche is a 3-4 day cultural festival, during which the Métis perform aspects of traditional Métis expressive culture, including Métis fiddling, singing, dancing, cooking, and sports competitions. This community event serves as both a place for the articulation of Métis visions of history, most notably through musical performance, and as a site of Métis community building and identity formation. On the final day of the festival, the Métis hold a memorial service to those warriors killed at Batoche in 1885 at the mass grave site in which they were buried. For the purposes of this paper, I largely focus on the annual political meeting of the Métis, as a site for the Métis to reclaim Batoche through both discourse and the act of passing legislation in their ancestral capital.

This chapter is structured around a history of the event since its first celebration in 1970, and a case study of the 1990 Back to Batoche Days, which occurred at the height of the Oka Crisis--one of the largest armed conflicts between native people and the Canadian government since the 1885 Resistance--to illustrate the ways in which the Métis have sought to reclaim both the story of Batoche and the site itself. I also place emphasis, however, on the fact that Back to Batoche Days is not just a backwards-facing event, one concerned solely with reclaiming Batoche as a site of memory, but rather that the festival constitutes a method by which the Métis can envision Batoche as a distinctly Métis place in the present and future. Through confrontation, followed by collaboration, with the Canadian government, the Métis have made great strides in creating a future at Batoche, one that emphasizes a distinct Métis history of the place. I argue that through the annual celebration of Métis heritage at Batoche, the Métis have not only attempted to reclaim the memory of Batoche from the grip of settler colonial historical narratives, but have also succeeded in turning Batoche into a Métis place within the present and
future. In this way, as the author of the editorial quoted above says, Batoche is a site where the Métis rebuild their nation “from the ashes of the old.”

**Prelude to Back to Batoche: Early Métis Festivals 1885-1970**

Métis living in and around Batoche were holding festivals at or near the site of the battle from the earliest years following 1885. These festivals, irregularly held and rarely very highly attended, nevertheless set a precedent for Métis commemorations at Batoche, and are undoubtedly worth examining in their structure and purpose, although they lacked the ideological basis and organization that the modern festival possesses. Although we know significantly less about these festivals than we do about the modern Back to Batoche Days, the Métis organizers of the present festival identify these early Métis memorial days and “sports days” as the direct predecessors to Back to Batoche.

From the late 19th century, with the early actions of the National Métis Union and their Historical Committee, Métis were holding memorials and festivals in and around Batoche to commemorate the Rebellion. Diane Payment has argued that these festivals and meetings to commemorate the war and the Métis warriors who fought at Batoche were held mainly in secret, “out of fear of repression and retaliation from the government.” Nevertheless, locals at Batoche continued to hang up banners and make some sort of celebration of Riel and the Métis cause every year, usually around July 24th, throughout the early 20th century. Few records of these festivals survive, with the exception of a newspaper article from a paper in Saskatoon in 1935, which spoke about a special festival held by both Métis and whites at Batoche, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the conflict. The events at this festival included speeches

---

\(^{180}\) Payment, *Li Gens Libres*, 270.

\(^{181}\) Ibid.
from the President of the National Métis Union, sports, and a special meal of buffalo meat, provided graciously, the author reminds us, “by the Dominion government.” 182

This event, held in 1935, reflects on the efforts by the Métis to tell their own history of the events at Batoche through memorial festivals. Although the article suggests that the event was held jointly by both the Métis and white veterans of the conflict, the Métis clearly made an effort to re-emphasize the justice of the Métis cause in 1885. In the National Union President’s speech, according to the author of the newspaper article, he “saw the actions of Riel as inspired by the rebel chief’s love for the Métis. In Riel’s mind, the welfare of the Métis was foremost.” Another Métis speaker highlighted the avoidability of the conflict, saying that it was the product of “misunderstanding” and emphasizing the importance of Batoche to the history of Saskatchewan and western Canada. 183 The speeches at this event suggest that for the Métis, the festival of 1935 was an important place to articulate an emergent Métis historiography, one rooted in the justness of Louis Riel’s cause, and the importance of Batoche as a Métis place.

Undoubtedly there were other such festivals and meetings held at Batoche between 1885 and 1970 during which Métis participants sought to articulate a distinct vision of the events of 1885 and revive the reputation of the Métis and their leader Louis Riel, as well as to present their enduring presence in western Canada. The fact that so little is known about these events is most likely due to the continuing efforts by the Canadian government and the Roman Catholic Church in the early 20th century to erase Métis identity, and repress Métis political activity in Saskatchewan, particularly in the parochial and agricultural schools that the Catholic Church and Canadian government, respectively, set up for Métis youth. Diane Payment recounts a story from the early 1930s in which a young Métis girl attending school was ordered by her teacher not to

183 Ibid., 3.
speak in the traditional Métis tongue, Michif, and speak French or English instead. When she refused to do so, her teacher slapped her.  

Stories such as this one show how institutions such as the public schools conspired to repress Métis national identity and pride in the early 20th century. Despite these efforts, the few records we do have of Métis celebrations at Batoche, such as the one from 1935, suggest that the Métis never forgot themselves or their heritage, despite their oppressed status within Canadian society.

**Settler Narratives at Batoche 1885-1970**

Although the Métis seem never to have forgotten the events of Batoche in the early 20th century, the Canadian government had a vested interest in transforming the small town on the South Saskatchewan River into a site of settler memory and settler triumph. In 1923, the Canadian government bought a large portion of the old Batoche townsite and soon after erected a plaque, written entirely in English, that described Batoche as “the rebel headquarters,” where the treasonous Métis had been defeated by a triumphant Canadian army.  

This plaque was quickly scratched out, presumably by an angry local Métis person who either remembered the conflict or had a relative who had fought in it.  

Despite these small acts of resistance, and the continuing presence of Métis people at Batoche, the Canadian government and its national parks service, Parks Canada, continued to acquire more and more of the Batoche site. From the 1950s to the 1970s, Parks Canada purchased most of the old town, including the Batoche church and rectory, places that had been the center of Riel’s government in 1885. Parks Canada bought this land with the assistance of the local parish priest, Father Dubuc, but not, it seems with the support of the Métis community.

---

184 Payment, *Li Gens Libres*, 233.
186 Payment, *Li Gens Libres*, 283.
around Batoche.\textsuperscript{187} By the 1960s, Parks Canada had developed Batoche into a National Historic Site with a small museum and staff to provide tours of the place where the Métis had been defeated.\textsuperscript{188} It appears that at no time in this period of acquisition and development of Batoche National Historic Site did Parks Canada engage in any sort of consultation with the local Métis community, or the larger Métis organizations in Saskatchewan, such as the Métis Society of Saskatchewan, who by the late 1960s had become incredibly politically motivated and well organized under the leadership of radical scholar Howard Adams.\textsuperscript{189}

By 1970 then, the Canadian government had made a concerted effort to gain control of Batoche, both through a literal ownership of the site, and an interpretive plan that emphasized the defeat of the Métis and the victory of Canadian arms, as well as the end of an independent Métis national and cultural identity. Exhibits at the Batoche museum presented the Métis as squatting interlopers, with “no legal right to the land,” and envisioned the 1885 conflict as “clashes between primitive and civilized cultures.”\textsuperscript{190} It was in this context that the Métis Nation decided to reclaim Batoche as a physical space, to rebuild the new Métis Nation from the “ashes of the old.”

**A Brief History of Back to Batoche Days (1970-2018)**

The Métis Society of Saskatchewan planned and hosted the first Back to Batoche Days in 1970. Although not much is available on that first festival, the timing of it seems significant in the context of the Red Power movement erupting to the south in the United States. Just the year before, in November 1969, a group of native activists had occupied Alcatraz Island, in an effort to reclaim land they saw as belonging to native people. This was a major global story in the late

---

\textsuperscript{188} Hvenegaard and Marshall, “Hot Interpretation,” 4.
\textsuperscript{190} Hvenegaard and Marshall, “Hot Interpretation,” 6.
1960s and 1970s, and it seems likely that the event had an influence on Métis in Saskatchewan, who were also interested in reclaiming land from a settler government. By the second year it was running, the festival had already taken on a special significance for the Métis Nation. In a piece on the importance of Back to Batoche written in *New Breed* from June of 1971, the author argues that the Métis were defeated at Batoche “but only in body. The Métis lives on and will be reborn at Batoche.”191 The celebration of Back to Batoche every year since 1970 has certainly coincided with a “rebirth” of the prominence of the Métis Nation in the Canadian public eye, and this brief history of the event down the years will illustrate the ways in which the Métis have managed to capitalize on their increased publicity to force important concerns from the Canadian government in terms of their rights and in terms of ownership of Batoche.

The goal of Back to Batoche, from the outset, was regaining control of the battle site from Parks Canada. Howard Adams was ousted from his position as President of the Métis Society in 1971, but his successor and protegé Jim Sinclair soon took over the Society, and his radical rhetoric and confrontational style would help dictate Métis policy into the late 1980s. In 1973, during a speech at the Métis community of Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, about the upcoming festivities for Back to Batoche Days, Sinclair argued that “the Métis people believe that the historic site around Batoche should belong to them,” and that further “This land was controlled by our ancestors. It was seized from them by violence.” Sinclair finished his speech by demanding “that the Batoche Historic Site and some adjoining land be given to the Métis, for their own historical and cultural center.”192 Because the actual site of the battle was owned by Parks Canada, whose main interest was in “preserving” the site as it had stood in 1885, the organizers of the event were forced to hold it on private land adjacent to the battle site. This site,

---

which has come to be known as the Batoche Festival Grounds, is located about half a mile north of Batoche National Historic Site, and since the 1970s has served as the locus of Métis activity around Batoche. Part of Sinclair’s argument, then, in demanding the return of Batoche, was to regain control of the site and its development as a Métis space.

In 1972, the Métis Society of Saskatchewan changed its name to the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan (AMNSIS), still under the leadership of Jim Sinclair, himself a non-status Indian from Saskatoon. During this time in the 1970s, Back to Batoche expanded, with quite high attendances recorded each year. In 1978, a writer for New Breed reported that 7,000 people attended the festival. In 1980, this estimate rose to 9,000, and it would continue to rise through the 1980s. Joe Sawchuk has argued that during this period of alliance between Métis and non-status Indians in Saskatchewan, the Métis gained a new visibility in the Canadian public eye, and the rise in attendance at Back to Batoche suggests that the festival was gaining prominence in concert with the revitalized Métis Nation.

In the run-up to the centennial celebration of the 1885 Rebellion, both Parks Canada and AMNSIS made special efforts to commemorate the momentous occasion. Parks Canada unveiled a new interpretive plan for Batoche, one which, unlike the earlier interpretive plans from the 1960s and 1970s, attempted to feature “various interpretations of the events” at Batoche in 1885. Diane Payment has argued that the 1982 interpretive plan and other moves by Parks Canada to prepare for the centennial represented an important progressive effort to “tell the

---

193 Non-status Indians in Canada are those people claiming an indigenous identity and cultural affiliation, but lacking official recognition from the Canadian government or any treaty rights. For more on this, see Sawchuk, “Negotiating and Identity,” 85-87.
196 Sawchuk, “Negotiating an Identity,” 85.
Métis as well as the government side of the story of 1885,” although she acknowledges the new interpretive center opened in 1985 was unpopular with the Métis.198

Indeed, the new interpretive center, opened just in time for the centennial in 1885, has sparked a great deal of controversy and is worth examining for the ways in which it perpetuates certain settler myths around the events at Batoche. Built in a modernist style, and in the shape of a rifle pointed directly at the Batoche church, the center has been described by Métis critics as “jarring” and offensive to the landscape.199 Further, the architecture firm that built the interpretive center, IKOY, based out of Winnipeg, revealed in its description of the building a certain settler bias. The architects write that their intention with the building was to present Batoche as symbolizing the “Métis’ last stand as a united people, the end of their independence, and the eventual closing of the Canadian frontier.”200 This statement reveals the limitations of Parks Canada’s perspective in the 1980s, despite their efforts to tell “both sides of the story.” For the architects who built the interpretive center, and it would seem, for Parks Canada, Batoche was still predominantly a place of Métis vanishing and the triumph of settler colonialism.

This assumption flew directly in the face of the growing political visibility of the Métis in Saskatchewan, and their own efforts to commemorate the centennial. In 1982, after years of negotiations, Queen Elizabeth II proclaimed the new Canadian Constitution, which included a provision recognizing the Métis as a distinct aboriginal group within Canada.201 This act gave the Métis recognition and “status” within the Canadian political system, something they had been fighting to regain ever since the Canadian government had erased Métis identity in the late 19th

198 Payment, Li Gens Libres, 290.
201 Weinstein, Quiet Revolution West, 58.
and early 20th century. This new prominence, including the inclusion of the term “Métis” on the Canadian census, coincided with intense planning for the 1985 Back to Batoche Days, rebranded as Métis Heritage Days for the centennial. In a pamphlet put out by AMNSIS’ Batoche Centenary Corporation (BCC) in preparation for the 1985 celebration, entitled “The Métis People Commemorate the Centenary of the Northwest Resistance: 1885-1985,” the epigraph at the start described the importance of Batoche to the Métis, both in the past and the present:

Batoche is the heart of the Métis people...the Northwest Resistance is the most important symbol of the Métis Nation. For most Canadians the Northwest ‘Rebellion’ is simply a fascinating part of the history of Western Canada. But for the Métis Resistance at Batoche, the last battle in a long struggle, was at the same time the beginning of a hundred year struggle for social justice and cultural recognition. In 1985 the Métis people will recognize the centenary of the Resistance by commemorating those who fell and by celebrating the renewal of Métis culture.

This statement suggests that for the Métis the centenary celebration was not just about emphasizing the Métis’ “last stand,” but about the enduring legacy of Batoche and the continuing struggle of the Métis for recognition and sovereignty that had in many ways begun at Batoche. Jim Sinclair, still the AMNSIS President, summed up the view that the centennial celebration was important not just for the anniversary of the Battle of Batoche, but for the recent successes of the Métis in gaining recognition from Canada, when he wrote in an open letter published in New Breed in July 1985 that “For the first time in 100 years, the Canadian government has recognized that the Métis have a constitutional right to negotiate for land and

---

self-government.” Sinclair went on to welcome “all visitors to Back to Batoche, as they share with us the spirit of the Métis dream and the pride of the Métis Nation.”

This clash of interpretation in the 1985 Centenary reflected an enduring tension between Parks Canada and the Métis of Saskatchewan. Despite the increasingly good relationship that the Métis were enjoying with the Canadian government, including official recognition in the Canadian Constitution, and a restoration to the Canadian census, Canada had yet to fulfil the demand that Jim Sinclair had laid out in 1973, that Batoche be returned to the Métis, for their sole use. Although much had been gained in the lead-up to 1985, the original goal of the Métis organizers of Back to Batoche remained unfulfilled.

In 1987, AMNSIS experienced an ugly divorce. The Métis had gained some semblance of status within the Canadian Constitution in 1982, but their non-status Indian allies had not. This meant that the Métis now had different goals, beyond recognition, and as a result they left non-status Indians behind. It was at Batoche in 1987 that this conflict would come to a head. Jim Sinclair, who had served as president of the Métis Society and its successor AMNSIS since 1972, came under increasing fire as an Indian leading a Métis organization, and in response he announced in 1987 that he would not be standing for reelection at Batoche that year. In an open letter published in *New Breed*, Sinclair criticized those within AMNSIS who had begun to debate “why an Indian should be leading the Métis,” when, he argued, the real issue was as it had always been, “a land base and self-government for the Métis.” In the final lines of his letter,

---

205 Ibid.
206 Sawchuk, “Negotiating an Identity,” 87.
Sinclair urged his constituents to resist division, and to fight so that “your dreams, and the dreams of your children, will become a reality.”

Despite Sinclair’s efforts, AMNSIS came to an end at Back to Batoche in 1987. The Métis reverted to their old name, the Métis Society of Saskatchewan, and Jim Sinclair, who had devoted his life to gaining rights for the Métis, and regaining Batoche, was ousted as president of an organization which no longer had a place for people like him. Despite the concerted efforts of Sinclair and his supporters to reverse the decision made by the Assembly at Batoche, the split was complete. In an interview recorded in 2004, Sinclair expressed his sadness over the split, saying how shocking it was, when after all he had “led the Métis for 20 years. I’d fought for them in the Constitution. I spoke all I could for them,” and was nevertheless somewhat unceremoniously kicked out.

Following this fraught divorce, the Métis Society of Saskatchewan continued to celebrate Back to Batoche Days, and continued to demand land rights from the Canadian government. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Métis meeting at Batoche would reassert their rights as a people and the importance of Batoche as a Métis place.

“No Surrender:” The 1990 Batoche Assembly and the Oka Crisis

Since the 1971 Back to Batoche Days, the second edition of the festival, the event has always featured the annual general meeting of the various iterations of what is now called the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan. There is great significance attached to the fact that the Métis of Saskatchewan hold their most important political meeting at Batoche each year, as it not only re-centers Batoche as the heart of Métis political life, but allows the Métis to reclaim Batoche as the

209 Weinstein, *Quiet Revolution West,* 120-121.
210 Jim Sinclair, interviewed by Ron LaLiberte, Saskatchewan, 2004, transcript, Gabriel Dumont Institute Archives, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.
“ancestral capital” of the Métis Nation. My examination of these Annual General Meetings-- and one in particular, the 1990 Assembly, an especially dramatic assembly held at the height of the Oka Crisis-- reveals that the Métis assembling at Batoche have used the meeting as an opportunity to articulate a Métis interpretation of history through rhetoric and legislation. In this way, the Métis of Saskatchewan use the Batoche Assembly to not just reclaim Batoche in the present, but as a site of memory for the Métis Nation.

In 1990, Canada was in the throes of the Oka Crisis, which constituted the largest armed uprising by native people against the Canadian government since Riel and the Métis in 1885. The conflict began over plans by a town council in Oka, Quebec, to expand a golf course into a small forest considered sacred by the local Mohawk Indian population, called “The Pines.” It was further tied, however, to the ongoing constitutional talks that would culminate in 1992 with the pyrrhic victory of the Charlottetown Accords, but in 1990 had ground to a frustrating halt. First Nations and Métis groups had to this time been excluded from the ongoing constitutional talks, and in 1990 anti-government sentiment among native people, and the Mohawk in particular, was very high.211 Starting in March, the Mohawk began occupying the site of “The Pines,” culminating in an armed standoff between members of the Mohawk Warrior Movement, a paramilitary native rights group, and the Quebec police, which resulted in the death of a Quebec police officer.212

The standoff, which lasted into September of 1990, sparked a nationwide reckoning on Canada’s treatment of indigenous peoples. Officials in the Canadian government regarded the Mohawk at Oka as members of an “armed insurrection” and a “criminal organization,” and sought as best they could to demonize the native warriors holding the site. Political scientists

212 Ibid., 92-94.
Rita Dhamoon and Yasmeen Abu-Laban write that “popular media representations of the Indigenous people...represented Mohawks as savage extremists who were beyond the rule of law,” with common newspaper headlines from Montreal and Toronto characterizing the protestors as looters and violent criminals.\textsuperscript{213}

Meanwhile, the newly reformed Métis Society of Saskatchewan, looked on the events of the summer of 1990 with concern. The 1990 Batoche Assembly, held at the height of the Oka standoff in July of that year, would become a space for the Métis to articulate their solidarity with the Mohawk Warriors and reassert their historical and contemporary claim to Batoche. The Métis too had been frustrated by the lack of movement in constitutional talks up to that point, and the lack of inclusion of Métis and First Nations leaders in the negotiations.\textsuperscript{214} In his opening address to the Assembly, Gerald Morin, Secretary of the Métis Society, expressed these frustrations, stating emphatically that the Métis “must no longer allow governments to suppress our pre-existing and inherent rights,” and that in 1885, “Louis Riel and the Métis acted on our inherent and pre-existing rights,” noting too that Riel and his compatriots “did not ask the permission” of the Canadian government to do so.\textsuperscript{215} Later in his speech, Morin quoted directly A.H. de Trémaudan, telling his fellow Métis to “hold our heads high, and strive to assert our Métisness.”\textsuperscript{216} Although Morin never explicitly advocated that the Métis take a similarly confrontational path as the Mohawk at Oka, his recalling of the Métis’ violent past must be seen as significant, and, in light of events later in the Assembly, as a statement of solidarity with the Mohawk. In calling to memory the directness with which the Métis had asserted their rights in 1885, Morin drew a parallel with the ongoing struggle at Oka.

\textsuperscript{214} Weinstein, \textit{Quiet Revolution West}, 122.
\textsuperscript{215} Gerald Morin, “Report to the M.S.S. Annual Assembly,” Batoche General Assembly Minutes (NP:1990), 1.
\textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 2.
Later in the Assembly, as the Métis Society was passing legislation, they issued a unanimous declaration of solidarity with the Mohawk at Oka. This extraordinary document, begins by drawing a direct comparison between Oka and Batoche, declaring that “the Mohawk people of Kanesetake (Oka) are experiencing the same kind of attack on their people and land, that was suffered by the Métis here Batoche in 1885, before demanding that the Canadian government return the Mohawk their land, and in the same vein “assume its responsibility for dealing with Métis land and self-government rights, along with the return of our lands at Batoche.” This resolution passed with almost no debate and complete unanimity among the several hundred delegates, and certainly represented a combative stance against the Canadian government, as well as a restating of the historical legacy of Batoche.

By drawing the comparison between Oka and Batoche, the Métis Society were articulating a Métis understanding of history, one closely related to the indigenous paradigm described by Susan A. Miller, a paradigm that seeks to intentionally tie the events of the past to ongoing political concerns. In this view, the struggle for Batoche is an ongoing one, not just an event that occurred in 1885. This suggests then, that the Métis in 1990 were not just drawing a comparison between Batoche and Oka for strategic purposes, but in so doing were articulating a distinct view of the past, one in which the Battle of Batoche is central to the Métis past, present, and future.

A few months after the conclusion of the Oka Crisis, Métis historian and leader Howard Adams, whose book *Prison of Grass* is one of the defining works of Métis historiography and political activism, wrote an unpublished manuscript entitled “No Surrender,” in which he described his view of the events that unfolded in the summer of 1990. In this manuscript, Adams

217 “Motion #005/90,” Batoche General Assembly Minutes (NP:1990) Museum of Métis Culture, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 3.
218 Miller, “Native Historians Write Back,” 16.
presents Oka as a successor to Batoche in many ways, saying that the standoff was the largest military conflict since “1885 when Ottawa attacked the Indians and the Métis in Saskatchewan to seize their lands...and then imprisoned those natives they did not kill.”219 Later in the piece, Adams sums up what one might identify as a central tenet of the Métis view of history, when he writes that “decolonization never takes place unnoticed. It happens under the glare of history’s floodlights.”220 In many ways, this is what the Métis have done at Batoche since 1970, placing the site under the glare of “history’s floodlights” and reminding the Canadian government and themselves that the Métis have not forgotten their own unique understanding of what happened there.

**Back to Batoche in the 21st Century**

In the aftermath of the Oka Crisis, Canada faced intense criticism from both native people in Canada and the international community. The brutality with which the Canadian government treated the protesters at Oka, and the degree to which the conflict escalated, turned Oka into a national embarrassment for Prime Minister Brian Mulroney’s government.221 This embarrassment prompted a revaluation of the relationship between native peoples and the Canadian government, culminating in the inclusion of First Nations and Métis leaders at the negotiations that would produce the ill-fated Charlottetown Accords and the creation of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1991.222

In the early 1990s, the Métis Society rebranded itself as the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan (MNS), in accordance with increasing efforts by the Métis to be recognized as a

---

220 Ibid., 49.
distinct nation within Canada.\textsuperscript{223} After several years of negotiation, the Métis Nation Accord was passed at the Charlottetown Negotiations in 1992, during which indigenous and Canadian leaders met to negotiate a new Constitutional consensus on the place of indigenous peoples in Canada. The resulting Charlottetown Accord, of which the Métis Nation Accord was a part, recognized “Aboriginal government as one of three orders of government in Canada,” granting native peoples ostensibly the right to self-government.\textsuperscript{224} The Métis Nation Accord within this larger document provided legal backing for Métis self-government and a Métis land base. This legislation marked a major turning point for the Métis in their efforts to define their national identity, but would end in failure, as the Accord was rejected in a national referendum held in late 1992.\textsuperscript{225}

Despite this setback, the MNS pushed on and enjoyed more success in their negotiations with the provincial government of Saskatchewan. By 1998, the MNS had signed a memorandum with the Saskatchewan government which provided for some limited self-government among the Métis, and gave the MNS the right to co-management of Batoche National Historic Site, a partial fulfilling of Sinclair’s demand.\textsuperscript{226} This culminated in 2000 with a new management plan for Batoche, created jointly by Parks Canada and the MNS, which represented a significant step up from prior interpretive plans. In an introductory note, Sheila Copps, then-Minister of Canadian Heritage, wrote that the new goal of the park was to impart “conflicting viewpoints of the history” of what happened at Batoche in 1885. Copps further touted the collaboration with the MNS, suggesting that this would allow for greater “commemorative integrity” at Batoche. Despite this sentiment, however, the management plan remained steeped in settler

\textsuperscript{223} Weinstein, \textit{Quiet Revolution West}, 125.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid., 131.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 130.
\textsuperscript{226} Payment, \textit{Li Gens Libres}, 294.
understandings of history, with Copps writing that Batoche National Historic Site should “contribute to an understanding and collective sense of Canada’s national identity.” This statement suggests that for Parks Canada, Batoche is still a site of memory primarily for Canadian national history, of which Métis history is but a piece. Despite this continuing commitment to Batoche as a Canadian place, the new management plan was generally well-received by the Métis, and certainly represents an important step in the reclaiming of Batoche.

It was around this same time, at the turn of the 21st century, that Back to Batoche Days reached its nadir. In 1998, only about 3,000 people attended the event, far down from the numbers recorded for the 1970s and 1980s, and Métis leader and journalist Terry Lusty remarked that “without major overhaul” Back to Batoche was “doomed to die.” Many Métis who felt upset with the direction the festival was going were most annoyed with the increasing institutionalization of the event, planned as it was by the bureaucratic MNS, which now charged a ticket fee for entrance. One angry attendee asserted that “the festivity has to get into the hands of the people and out of the political circles.” This anger perhaps reflected frustration with the increasing institutionalization of Métis political activism as well, as the MNS continued to develop a relationship with the Saskatchewan government, and the organization itself entered its 30th year.

Back to Batoche has rebounded in the 21st century however, due to an increasing cosmopolitanism in its organization. Although the event still costs money, in 2005 the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan began to collaborate with other Métis organizations around Canada, including the Manitoba Métis Federation and the Métis Nation of Ontario, in organizing Back to

---

228 Payment, Li Gens Libres, 295.
230 Ibid., 4.
Batoche, and as a result the event has drawn more and more Métis from around Canada and even the United States. The organizers have also sought to emphasize the entertainment aspect of Back to Batoche Days in recent years, with the creation of the “Métis Idol” competition, at which singers compete to have their music performed on a local radio station. This event has drawn hundreds of performers to Back to Batoche Days, and helped raise the profile of the event. Despite these changes, however, Back to Batoche Days has remained committed to a presentation of traditional Métis culture, with Métis participants continuing to engage in fiddling, jigging, and traditional Métis cooking and sports, as well as commemorations to the fallen Métis warriors at Batoche.

Back to Batoche Days has thus served as a vital event for the Métis in Saskatchewan and throughout the US and Canada more generally since its origin in 1970. In the years that the festival has run, the Métis have gained important rights from the Canadian government, and the increased public visibility that the festival has afforded the Métis has allowed the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan to take a more active role in the management and the interpretation of the Batoche site. Although the Métis have yet to totally regain Batoche, Back to Batoche Days has clearly served an important role in, as Diane Payment argues, making Batoche a “Métis place” again.

---

231 Cheryl Petten, “Metis Celebrate 35 Years of Going Back to Batoche,” Saskatchewan Sage 9, no. 10 (2005), 5.
232 Ibid., 6.
234 Payment, Li Gens Libres, 299.
Conclusion- Métis Alternate Histories and Futures: *Riel on Ice*, 2015

At Back to Batoche Days in 2015, visitors were treated to a new multimedia art display, entitled *Riel on Ice*. The piece was commissioned by a Métis organization, the Friends of Batoche, jointly with Parks Canada, and was completed by Toronto-based artist Liz Pead. The installation, which featured both visual and audio components, was hung in the main lobby of the visitor center at Batoche National Historic Site (NHS) throughout the summer of 2015. The artist responsible for creating the piece, Liz Pead, makes a conscious effort throughout the piece, with the help of Métis scholars at the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Applied Native Studies (GDI), to tell the “Métis side” of the 1885 Resistance. The following analysis will highlight *Riel on Ice* as a performance of Métis history, in the vein of Taylor’s “Repertoire,” and one in which the artist turns the settler space of the visitor center at Batoche NHS into a Métis space, and recounts the historical “scenario” of Métis defeat at Batoche through the lens of that most Canadian of activities, a hockey game. This installation however, does not limit itself to an exploration of the Métis past, but carries the Métis interpretation of the Battle of Batoche and the 1885 Resistance, established by the writings of Tremaudan and Adams, and reified at Back to Batoche Days, into the present, and through its unconventional retelling of the 1885 Resistance, makes room for a Métis future at Batoche.

Taylor argues that performances serve as “vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity,” to those who participate in them.\(^\text{235}\) This situates performance as a method through which historical knowledge is transmitted, and places performance as an epistemology, comparable to the epistemology of writing, or the “archive” that we see in contemporary Western culture.\(^\text{236}\) For Taylor, the study of performance rather than

\(^{236}\) Ibid., 3.
the written necessitates a “shift in methodology,” from one in which “texts and narratives” are studied, to one in which the emphasis is placed on “scenarios,” which Taylor defines as “a paradigmatic setup that relies on supposedly live participants, structured around a schematic plot, with an intended (though adaptable) end.”\textsuperscript{237} The scenario, then, offers us a way of understanding events in the past without the academic constraints of telling history “as it really happened,” that is, focusing on an analysis of a historical narrative in which events are part of a larger, often linear historical trajectory from the past to the present.

*Riel on Ice* was commissioned by the Friends of Batoche, a volunteer group made up of mainly of Métis people who live in and around Batoche, whose main purpose is to work with Parks Canada to “enhance public awareness, appreciation and enjoyment of Batoche National Historic Site.”\textsuperscript{238} Friends of Batoche worked closely with both Parks Canada and the Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI), a research institute set up by the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan in the 1980s to “promote the renewal and development of Métis culture” through historical scholarship and “Métis-specific educational programs.”\textsuperscript{239} These organizations, representing both the Métis of Saskatchewan and the Canadian government, worked together in concert with the 1998 memorandum between the MNS and Parks Canada, agreeing to co-management of Batoche NHS, and the 2000 interpretive plan at Batoche NHS, which committed itself to representing “different and often conflicting viewpoints of history.”\textsuperscript{240}

Toronto-based artist Liz Pead was chosen to create the installation, and her name *Riel on Ice*, reveals the central conceit of the piece. Containing both a visual piece, entitled “Louis Riel

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{240} Parks Canada, “Batoche Site Management Plan,” i.
and the Batoche Church 1885,” and constructed from used hockey materials, and an audio component, featuring narration by Pead, the artwork reimagines the scenario of the Métis Resistance of 1885, as a hockey game between the “Rebels,” or the Métis, and the Canadian government, with Pead as the in-game commentator. Pead herself is a hockey player, and often incorporates the sport into her artwork. Hockey too, is a vital part of Canadian popular culture, and is often called the country’s “national pastime,” as baseball is in the United States. Scholar Michael Robidoux characterizes hockey as the “one expression of nationalism that has remained constant since Confederation” in Canada, and essential to what it means to be Canadian.

In this way, we can conceive of Pead’s use of hockey as a method of acting out the scenario of the 1885 Resistance as both a means of creating a relatable presentation for a Canadian audience, and a deeply subversive act, presenting an anti-colonial conflict through the frame of the settler state’s defining “national pastime.” This is immediately evident in the visual component of Riel on Ice, a large landscape entitled Louis Riel and the Church at Batoche, which consists entirely of recycled hockey gear, including jerseys, helmets, and sticks, to create a classic landscape painting depicting Batoche in winter. Pead subverts what first appears to be a tranquil scene of a church in winter by using a somewhat chaotic blending of hockey masks and discarded jerseys in the lower half of the landscape, turning what initially looks like a field of snow into a chaotic and almost violent scene, populated by hockey masks and bundled up

241 Liz Pead, Riel on Ice, 2015, multimedia display, Batoche National Historic Site.
245 Liz Pead, Louis Riel and the Church at Batoche, 2015, recycled hockey gear on canvas, Batoche National Historic Site.
jerseys, which take on almost human-like appearance within the work. The figure of Riel, if he can even be discerned in the painting, is a small brown blob in the foreground, only really recognizable for his striking difference in color from the rest of the yellowish-white almost-figures surrounding him in the snowy field of Batoche. Sticking out from the foreground, jutting into third-dimensional space, a group of hockey sticks and shin-guards are arranged in the form of a sled, or perhaps a stretcher, highlighting the wintry scene.

![Louis Riel and the Church at Batoche](image)

*Louis Riel and the Church at Batoche*
*Image courtesy of the Gabriel Dumont Institute*

This visual component is accompanied by an audio recording, played as observers are looking at *Riel and the Church at Batoche*. This audio segment imagines the 1885 Resistance and the Battle of Batoche as a hockey game between two rival teams, the Canadians and the “Rebels.” The “Rebels” are populated by significant figures on the Métis side in 1885, including Riel and his general Gabriel Dumont, while the Canadians are led by those who fought on the Canadian side in the war, including “General” Middleton, the commander of the Canadian forces at Batoche. Prime Minister John MacDonald is portrayed as the commissioner of the fictional
“Dominion Hockey League” in which the two teams are playing.\textsuperscript{246} By transforming the roles of the major figures from 1885 into that of hockey players playing a game, Pead turns the story of 1885 into a relatable scenario, that of a tense game between two teams in Canada’s national pastime. This simultaneously draws in a Canadian audience familiar with the sport, and uses the classic Canadian scenario of a hockey game to tell an anti-colonial and native perspective on the past. Pead’s decision to transform the story into a hockey game won praise from Métis observers, notably the Gabriel Dumont Institute, which in a special pamphlet written to accompany the installation, praised Pead’s unconventional interpretation of the history, describing her use of artistic license as “very unique and entertaining” and a way to look at history in a new and valuable way.\textsuperscript{247}

Pead reimagines the Battle of Batoche as a fistfight between the two “captains” of the rival teams, Middleton and Riel, right at the end of the last period of the game. The fight ends when Middleton “suckerpunches” Riel in the neck, and Riel falls to the ground, covered in blood.\textsuperscript{248} A timeout is called, and the game goes to a commercial break. In the more traditional version of events, this is how the 1885 Resistance ended, with Middleton and his army “knocking out” Riel and his forces, and dragging Riel away to be tried and eventually executed. This is not how Pead chooses to end the story. In fact, she leaves the end of the hockey game as uncertain, ending her audio recording as the game is going into overtime. In the last few seconds of the recording Pead’s character, hockey announcer Cassie Campbell-Paschell, interviews Albert Monkman, a Métis leader in 1885 whose descendant Kent Monkman, a contemporary of Pead, is also a player for the “Rebel” team. Monkman describes the Métis performance in the last period, saying that “we came out hard, we tried our best, it was a tough game, but I think we’ll

\textsuperscript{246} Pead, \textit{Riel on Ice}.
\textsuperscript{248} Pead, \textit{Riel on Ice}, 2015, audio recording, 7:16-7:30.
do good in OT.” Pead asks Monkman how Riel is doing, and he answers that “he seemed to be ok when I saw him last.”

Pead’s decision to end the audio recording not with Middleton’s knocking out of Riel, but with the game going into overtime and featuring contemporary Métis people such as Kent Monkman, subverts the “bad script” of the 1885 Resistance, and turns it into a story of the continuing struggle of the Métis, featuring what Taylor would term the “unscripted” action of the overtime period, and Riel’s questionable fate. The hockey game Battle of Batoche doesn’t end with Riel’s defeat by Middleton in a fistfight, but carries on into the present, represented by the overtime period. Monkman’s assertion that Riel was “ok” when he saw him last, also calls into question a central fact of the 1885 narrative, that of Riel’s trial and execution by the Canadian state, and leaves the listener to wonder at his fate. In this way, Pead’s work makes the 1885 Resistance, steeped as it has been in settler narratives of erasure and vanishing, into a continuing story of Métis survival and resistance, in which even Riel’s fate is unclear.

The fact that Riel on Ice was installed and played in the visitor center at Batoche, the very same building erected in 1985 and meant to convey the “last stand of the Métis as a united people,” served to transform the space from a settler one to a Métis one, where the Métis come out of Batoche not as losers, but as beat-up players who are still ready to fight for a win in overtime. After being taken down following the summer of 2015, Pead’s work has not been installed elsewhere. Instead, it remains continually tied to its installation and presentation at Batoche, the place in which it was originally meant to be displayed. Although the piece was the result of collaboration between Parks Canada, Métis organizations and Saskatchewan, and the artist, Riel on Ice remains a deeply subversive re-working of history. This is heightened by the

---

249 Pead, Riel on Ice, 8:15-8:46.
251 See more discussion on the interpretive center on p. 72.
fact that the work hung within the grounds of Batoche NHS, with the apparent endorsement of the settler state. Yet *Riel on Ice* bears all the hallmarks of the Métis view of the history of Batoche, including an emphasis on the continuing struggle of the Métis that started, rather than ended, at Batoche, and the intentional tying of the 1885 Resistance to current events, in this case a fictional hockey game played out in the 21st century. *Riel on Ice* and the circumstances of its creation and installation suggest a method of anti-colonial historiography that finds ways to present Métis view of history through apparent collaboration with the settler state. This fits somewhat neatly into Taylor’s description of how performances are capable of revoking “bad scripts” by taking place “in front of” the colonizers themselves, in this case the Canadian government and non-Métis public.252

**Conclusion- Métis Futures at Batoche**

Since 1885, the Métis in Saskatchewan have made concerted efforts to reassert their historical presence at Batoche, and in so doing have also attempted to reassert their claim to the place as a site of memory. Through a yearly festival, Back to Batoche Days, the Métis have successfully contested Batoche to the point that the settler narratives that once dominated the place have been called into question. The Métis have consistently used Batoche as a space to articulate their own understanding of history, both written and performed. In 1990, this performance constituted the speeches and discussions the Métis made around the Oka Crisis, in which they tied Oka to their own struggle at Batoche in 1885, and emphasized their confrontational and violent history with the Canadian government. This confrontational stance in 1990 influenced the development of a cooperative relationship between the Canadian government and the Métis at Batoche, culminating in the shared management of the site between Parks Canada and the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan.

---

Displays such as *Riel on Ice*, created and installed in 2015 in accordance with this new cooperative co-management plan, suggest that despite the collaborative nature of the Métis relationship with Parks Canada, the Métis are still devoted to presenting their version of events. *Riel on Ice* presents a decidedly pro-Métis version of what happened in 1885, showcasing not the final defeat and annihilation of Riel and his people, but instead the continuing survival and will to resist that the Métis emphasize in their histories of Batoche. As Kevin Bruyneel argues in his seminal work on indigenous politics in the United States, *The Third Space of Sovereignty*, collaboration between the colonized and the colonizer does not necessarily lead to the weakening of the colonized.\(^{253}\) Rather, through both confrontation and collaboration with the Canadian government, the Métis have been able to tell their story of the past at Batoche, and in so doing have created a viable present and future at the site.

Bibliography


“An Act to amend and continue the Act 32 and 33 Victoria, Chapter 3; and to establish and provide for the government of the province of Manitoba.” *Statutes of Canada, Vol 2.* Ottawa: Brown and Chamberlain, 1870: 20-27.


