

Pamphlet # 5

The Métis: An Introduction

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European involvement in the Western Hemisphere after 1492 took many forms. In the north, the driving force was the chase for fur. In the area known as Rupert=s Land, the 'Indians' were left more or less unchanged so that they could continue to trap for furs unmolested, save that the Europeans often moved into their communities in order to increase productivity. Inevitably, these same Europeans were sometimes assimilated by the First Nations despite their plans to the contrary. As this interaction developed over time, there emerged a 'new people' complete with their own language and culture and their own social, economic and political institutions. These 'new people' came to be known as the Métis and, although their origins are hidden in the early years of the French fur trade, their subsequent history has had a great impact on the development of the Canadian Nation.

The Métis themselves left little in the way of written records but, despite this drawback, recent research has managed to uncover much of their story. We know, for instance, that their early history was bound up with the fur trade wars in Rupert=s Land in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. We also know that during these years the Métis initiated and practiced the cultural mechanisms by which they managed their communities. Therefore, the Nation that entered into Confederation with the Dominion of Canada in 1870 already possessed its own laws and means of social control, which were by then over a century old. Unfortunately,

later Métis history consisted of violent dispossession by the Canadian State followed by the disastrous effects of rapid enforced dispersal throughout their former homeland. After their last defeat in 1885, some Métis social practices and traditions were retained although many more were lost. The 'Forgotten Years' which followed were marked by concentration on individual survival. Nonetheless, the resurgence of the Nation after 1960 indicates that more than just a few scattered memories of Métis national customs and traditions were retained.

When the Métis finally reformulated their culture in the late 1960=s they faced many problems, not the least of which was the changed nature of their membership. They also had to recover and legitimize their social control mechanisms. In the process of cultural reformulation, the people turned to those Elders who still remembered the old ways and, in so doing, they rebuilt the basic structures of their Nation.

Historical Overview

Prior to describing the development of Métis social, economic and political customs, certain factors must be taken into consideration:

- The development of a new nation anywhere on the planet is not a common occurrence;
- Métis national development was relatively rapid, taking less than two hundred and fifty years from origins to the present;
- The Métis Nation was born in what was later known as Western Canada;
- The fur trade in southern Rupert=s Land was in decline after 1850;
- The Confederation of Canada occurred in 1867; and
- Canada colonized Rupert=s Land after 1870.

All these factors, combined with Métis willingness to be part of the process of Canadian expansion into the Northwest and their subsequent rejection by Canada, are what constitute the basis of Métis history.

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