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Abstract

Framed by the battles of Seven Oaks (Red River Territory, 1816) and Batoche (Saskatchewan, 1885), the history of the Métis, who emerged as a distinct ethnicity of mixed blood in Prairie Canada during the nineteenth century, is largely shaped by the confrontation with an increasingly forceful settler imperialism that challenged the traditional semi-nomadic, collectivist life style of the Métis and brought the old order of the West to a close when the Canadian Pacific Railway was completed in 1885. In view of Ottawa's threatening expansionism, the Métis not only made legal attempts but also engaged in guerilla military activities to resist the fatal consequences which Canada's westward movement had for them. While Louis Riel (1844-1885) represented the legalist position, Gabriel Dumont (1837-1906) became an icon for the guerilla fight against settler imperialism. The article attempts to highlight some of the most important facts in the history of Métis resistance, whereby both historiographic accounts as well as a selected number of literary texts are consulted.

Résumé

Encadrée par les batailles de la Grenouillère (sur le territoire de la rivière Rouge, 1816) et de Batoche (Saskatchewan, 1885), l'histoire des Métis – émergeant au XIX^{e} siècle comme ethnicité distincte de sang-mêlé sur les prairies du Canada – est grandement marquée par la confrontation avec l'impérialisme des colons contestant le style de vie des Métis, traditionnellement semi-nomade et collectiviste, et mettant finalement un terme à l'ordre ancien de l'ouest canadien par la finalisation du Chemin de fer Canadien Pacifique en 1885. Au regard de l'expansionnisme menaçant des autorités d'Ottawa, les Métis entreprenaient des tentatives légales pour résister aux conséquences fatales du mouvement canadien vers l'ouest, mais ils s'engageaient aussi activement dans la tactique militaire de la guérilla. Alors que Louis Riel (1844-1885) représentait la

position légaliste, Gabriel Dumont (1837-1906) est devenu une icône des guérillas contre l'impérialisme des colons. L'article essaye de mettre en relief quelques-uns des faits les plus importants dans l'histoire de la résistance des Métis, à partir de comptes-rendus historiographiques et d'une sélection de textes littéraires.

1. "La Bataille des sept chênes"

"La Bataille des sept chênes"

Voulez-vouz écouter chanter
Une chanson de vérité ?
Le dix-neuf de juin la bande des Bois-Brûlés
Sont arrivés comm des braves guerriers.

En arrivant à la Grenouillère
Nous avons fait trois prisonniers ;
Trois prisonniers des Arkanys
Qui sont ici pour piller notr pays.

Étant sur le point de débarquer
Deux de nos gens se sont écriés
Deux de nos gens se sont écriés
Voilà l'Anglais qui vient nous attaquer.

Tout aussitôt nous avons déviré
Avons été les rencontrer
J'avons cerné le band des Grenadiers,
Ils sont immobiles, ils sont tout démontés.

J'avons agi comme des gens d'honneur,
J'avons envoyé un ambassadeur,
Le gouverneur, voulez-vous arrêter
Un p'tit moment, nous voulons vous parler ?

Le gouverneur qui est enragé
Il dit à ses soldats, Tirez !
Le premier coup, c'est l'Anglais qu'a tiré,
L'ambassadeur ils ont manqué de tuer.

Le gouverneur qui se croit empereur,
Il veut agir avec rigueur ;
Le gouverneur qui se croit empereur
À son malheur, agit trop de rigueur.

Avant vu passer tous ces Bois-Brûlés
Il a parti pour les épouvanter ;
Étant parti pour les épouvanter ;
Il s'est trompé, il s'est bien fait tuer.

Il s'est bien fait tuer
Quantité de grenadiers,
J'avons tué presque tout son armée,
Sur la band' quatre ou cinq sont sauvés.

Si vous aviez vu tous ces Anglais
Et tous ces Bois-Brûlés après
De butte en butte les Anglais culbutaient.
Les Bois-Brûlés jetaient des cris de joie.

Qui en a composé la chanson
Pierre Falcon, poète du canton.
Elle a été faite et composée
Sur la victoire que nous avons gagnée.
Elle a été faite et composée
Chantons la gloire de tous les Bois-Brûlés. (MacLeod 5-7)

Titled "Le Chanson de la Grenouillère" or "La Bataille des sept chênes," the story captured in the lines of what has also become known as "Falcon's Song" accounts for an incident which took place on 19 June 1816 near Fort Douglas at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers (Manitoba). Depending on the viewpoint, it has entered the history books either as the Battle of Seven Oaks or Selkirk Massacre and describes a militant confrontation between the local Métis and members of the Selkirk Settlement, the first Scottish community in the Canadian West, founded in 1812. La Bataille des sept chênes is generally considered the beginning of Métis resistance against Canada's increasingly forceful settler imperialism on the prairies in the nineteenth century that challenged the traditional semi-nomadic, collectivist life style of the Métis and brought the old order of the West to a close when the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) was completed in 1885. The narrator of the story is singer and poet Pierre Falcon (1793-1876), a witness to the conflict, whose musical depiction of the Battle of Seven Oaks served as the "national anthem" of the Métis during the decades following the incident. "Falcon's Song" foreshadows a development which is framed by the Battle of Seven Oaks on the one hand and the Northwest Rebellion of 1885 with its decisive battle at Batoche (Saskatchewan) on the other.

Following an introduction to the Métis as a distinct prairie people who emerged in the era of the fur trade, the focus of this essay will then shift to the

narrative treatment of some of the most significant events in the collective and personal history of Métis resistance. Among the sources consulted here are historiographic accounts as well as a few selected literary texts. The individual works represent either a non-Métis or a Métis perspective and include narrations such as Maria Campbell's semi-fictional autobiography *Halfbreed: A Proud and Bitter Canadian Legacy* (1973), which stands for a form of literary resistance that finds its expression in the (re)voicing of traumatic experiences, thus also fostering the healing process.[1]

2. A PEOPLE OF THE FUR TRADE

The gradual penetration of the Canadian West by French *coureurs de bois* and English trappers in the latter part of the eighteenth century was accompanied by interracial contacts and marriages that point at a practice which would also become customary among the employees and officers of the two fur trading enterprises, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC, 1670), and its rival from Montreal, the Compagnie du Nord-Ouest (Northwest Company, 1783-1784). As a general rule, the employees of the HBC were drawn from Scotland and the Orkney Islands, while those of the Northwest Company were Scots and French Canadians. In 1821, the two companies merged and extended their business under the name of the Hudson's Bay Company. It is estimated that by 1800 between 1,500 and 2,000 white men must have permanently stayed in the Northwest.

In this way, Canada's fur trade is closely connected with the confrontation of two antagonistic European cultural, linguistic, and religious parties and the cultures of the native peoples. It is in the Prairie West, where Scottish Calvinism met with French Catholicism, where the English tongue had to cope with its French counterpart. And from the intermingling of Natives and Europeans emerged an ethnically, linguistically, and culturally distinct as well as diverse Prairie people, known as Métis, Halfbreeds, or *Bois brulés*. In the words of Audrey Poitras, a genuine Métis voice, and since 1996 President of the Métis Nation of Alberta, this part of early western Aboriginal history reads as follows:

> We are the proud descendants of the indigenous women of our homeland, and the French or English-speaking men who travelled west as voyageurs and fur traders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, before Canada became a nation. Our ancestors had children and grandchildren who married other Métis westerners and created a distinctive way of life as one of Canada's Aboriginal peoples. (Poitras 4)

[1] Repeatedly, the article relies on previously published material by the author (see Klooss).

3. "THE NEW NATION"

The Métis would soon play a decisive role in the shaping and future development of the Canadian Plains, which in terms of commerce, political rule, and administration were in the hands of the mighty HBC. The company was in charge of Rupert's Land which was named after Prince Rupert of the Rhine (1619-1682), a nephew of the English monarch Charles I (1600-1649) and the first Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company. Areas belonging to Rupert's Land were mostly in present-day Canada and included the whole of Manitoba, most of Saskatchewan, southern Alberta, southern Nunavut, and northern parts of Ontario and Quebec. It also included present-day United States territory, extending into parts of the states of Minnesota and North Dakota as well as small parts of Montana and South Dakota.

During the following decades, the Métis developed a resolute feeling of independence and a keen sense of a unique identity which found its expression in their name "The New Nation." This community-based consciousness dominated the Métis for almost a century, notwithstanding the fact that this Prairie people were made up of different linguistic, religious, social, and economic groups. It separated them from the rest of the Plains population and played a key role in the history of Canada's western frontier.

As regards the policy of the HBC, it is noteworthy to emphasize that the mighty fur trading enterprise was:

> convinced of the incompatibility of colonization and the successful prosecution of the fur trade, so that for the next two generations the interests of the latter predominated. No further attempts at colonization were made and the Red River Settlement entered upon a period of quiet and obscure development. (Stanley, *Birth* 12)

4. RED RIVER AND THE CHALLENGE OF WESTWARD EXPANSION

4.1. Selkirk vs Cuthbert Grant

Stanley's reference to colonization points at the Selkirk or Red River Settlement of 1812. Thomas Douglas, 5th Earl of Selkirk (1771-1820), a major shareholder in the Hudson's Bay Company, had "established a colony of dispossessed Scottish crofters who were to supply provisions for the . . . Company in the Northwest but who were forbidden to deal in furs. They

settled in Assiniboia" (Charlebois 12-13), which extended from Lake Winnipeg south to the divide between the Red River and Mississippi Basins, and from the Lake of the Woods in the East to the source of the Assiniboine River in the West. Nearly half of the area was within the limits of what nowadays are Minnesota and North Dakota. With the establishment of the Red River Settlement, the Hudson's Bay Company reacted towards the fact that independent traders and employees of the Northwest Company had invaded the territory in search of their own fortune. The following militant disputes between the Métis on the one hand and the Scottish settlers on the other must be read as the result of an awakened self-consciousness of a special Plains people that "began to assert their claim to an aboriginal title to the country and to demand compensation from the white settlers" (Stanley, *Birth* 11) who in the words of Falcon "sont ici pour piller notr' pays."

After 1812, tensions got continually worse and finally culminated in the Battle of Seven Oaks (19 June 1816), causing twenty-one casualties among the Scottish settlers in an exchange of gun fire with the local Métis. Cuthbert Grant (1793-1854), the "Captain General of all the halfbreeds in the Country" (Stanley, *Birth* 11), lost only one of his men. La Grenouillère, which for some historians meant the birth of a Métis nation, was quickly over. Nonetheless, Selkirk should eventually be successful, as he received support from retired British soldiers and European mercenaries.

Seven Oaks set the initial stage in a series of disputes resulting from the discrepancies between the economic and communal concerns of the Red River Métis and those of the Canadians from the East. Each time the Métis were at the centre of political and armed resistance against the increasing influx of settlers, whereby the Red River Insurrection of 1869-1870 and the Northwest Rebellion (1885) mark the most important events in the history of confrontation and resistance.

4.2. Economic Shifts, Social Changes

The forceful foundation of the Red River Settlement must be regarded as a higly controversial and provocative political move, as it was instrumental in determining the future of Canada's Native peoples of the West. Since the District of Assiniboia,[2] which was to be turned into an agricultural colony, covered an area of 116,000 square miles, a considerable amount of land was exempted from further buffalo hunts which, next to the fur trade, had been the major sources of income for the Métis. Subsequently, French and English

[2] The name was taken from the Assiniboin First Nation and was used in official discourse between 1812 and 1869 to refer to the Red River Colony.

Halfbreeds alike began either to move westward or to settle, i.e. they exchanged their nomadic life for an existence as farmers on the banks of Red River, where the HBC kept one of its largest and strategically most important strongholds, Fort Garry.

In the following, the English company replaced "its feudal labor system [by] one of wage labor, a system easier to maintain and more flexible" (Dobbin 20). In order to reduce the uncertainty embodied in the new wage system, the powerful company allotted land to those employees who had lost their jobs in the merger with the Northwest Company. Additionally, it created a broader market for buffalo hides and pemmican. Subsequently, the Métis:

> splintered into a wage labor-class, a small agricultural class and a class of skilled buffalo hunters. These classes were not exclusive, for many Métis would farm for part of the year, work as farm labor, take part in annual buffalo hunts and work occasionally for the company. They had in common a dependence on the Hudson's Bay Company, which held a monopoly in the fur, buffalo hide and pemmican trade, and was the only purchaser of farm produce. (Dobbin 20)

A fourth group needs mentioning: this is the educated Métis elite which consisted of the children of the two companies' officers, many of whom had received their training in eastern Canada. Strongly opposed to the Hudson's Bay Company's commercial policy, they began trading on their own. It was these middle class free traders who became the national leaders of the Métis and who during the following decades articulated "Métis nationalism and the liberal democratic ideology which challenged the colonial monopoly of the HBC" (Dobbin 20).

All this is in keeping with what Stanley calls a "quiet and obscure development" (*Birth* 12). An unforeseeable transformation had taken place, i.e. an originally Scottish colony had gradually been turned into a Métis settlement. Between 1820 and 1860, this community experienced a steady growth, not so much because of further influx from eastern Canada or Europe, but because of a permanent rise of the Métis population. Red River became the favourite retreat of the Hudson's Bay Company servants with their native spouses and halfbreed progeny. In 1831, the local population numbered 2,417, nine years later 4,369. "Finally, in 1871 the official census stated that there were in the country 5,720 French-speaking half-breeds, 4,080 English-speaking half-breeds and 1,600 white settlers" (13). The Métis developed distinct forms of cultural practice and gradually assumed many of the characteristics of a separate nation. They inaugurated their own judicial system and, upon various occasions, tried to install their own form of local government. This is important, "for it explains why Canadian annexation, with its implied white predominance, failed to gain many adherents in the Red

River colony" (13). And yet, it must be noted that in the eyes of the Canadian public, especially the Anglo-Canadians of Puritan descent, the Métis remained *sauvages* and were thus confronted with more or less the same cultural and racial prejudices that the First Nations experienced.

4.3. "Le commerce est libre! Vive la liberté!"

Economic life in the Red River Settlement was relatively basic in character. The principal occupation was the buffalo hunt. Next in importance were freighting and farming. As the western states of America were opened to settlement, the occupation of freighting gained even more significance—the wooden two-wheeled Red River cart serving as the major means of transportation on the routes between the Red River Settlement and St. Paul, Minnesota. In this way, it was largely due to the Métis that Canada's Prairie economy was improved by a well-functioning transport system and a basic infrastructure.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the Red River cart system became a paramount tool for an increased free trade across the forty-ninth parallel which had been established as borderline between the United States and Canada in 1818. From the 1830s onwards, trading routes between the US and Assiniboia were frequently used to exchange Canadian furs for American goods. It hardly needs mentioning that the HBC was severely upset about this development, since free trade undermined the company's trading monopoly. The Métis, on the other hand, strongly favoured free trade and when the Hudson's Bay Company denied them any such activities, they even pleaded for a political affiliation with the United States. Yet, this did not find a positive response by the Americans. London's Colonial Office had no solution to the problem either but, upon the request of the company, sent a regiment and put Red River under martial law. When two years later, in 1849, the Royal troops retreated because no major incident had been reported, the Métis picked up the issue again and declared: "Le commerce est libre! Vive la liberté!" (qtd. in Howard 59). The Hudson's Bay Company had lost its monopoly.

Apart from the heavy disputes over free trade, Assiniboia maintained a fairly stable, if not even static society. This was, however, not to last for too long, since with Canada's claim to the Prairie West, the first settlement on the Plains became deeply involved in the dramatic changes that accompanied the forthcoming transfer of the country to the Dominion of Canada.

4.4. Land Claims

In light of the events succeeding the establishment of the Red River Settlement, the middle decades of the nineteenth century (1830-1870) proved to be an especially crucial period of time, as they were largely shaped by the political, economic, social, and legal issues that are connected with the closure of the trading monopoly of the HBC in 1859 and the transfer of authority from the company to the Canadian Government under the leadership of Prime Minister John A. Macdonald (1815-1891).

Contemporary economic theory, generally known as Manchester Liberalism, had it that the age of the chartered companies, which were established in the seventeenth century, had to come to a close. Mid-Victorian political thought would no longer tolerate the quasi-governmental power of an enterprise like the Hudson's Bay Company, whose original objective was clearly geared towards commerce. Instead, Adam Smith (1723-1790), for instance, would argue in book 5 of his seminal study *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1784) that the chartered company had turned into an anachronistic model and that the clash between the interests of trade and the responsibilities of the government could no longer be ignored (743-44, 755).

When in 1836 Lord Selkirk's heirs had transferred the territory to the HBC, this had no effect on the distribution of land. As indicated, the majority of the settlers were Métis-squatters who maintained the view that the land was theirs by natural law and that there was no need for any title issued by the company. The absence of a systematic land tenure according to capitalist rules of private ownership, although it aroused no apprehension at the time, was to prove an important cause of unrest among the Native squatters when the territory was transferred to the Dominion of Canada. The system of survey by which the settlement was divided was similar to that adopted in French Canada. The farms were long and narrow and at right angles to the general course of the river. They all had frontage on the water, after the fashion of farms in Québec—a system which had grown up from the times when rivers were the principal routes of communication.

The general shift in economic and political perspective led to a new view of and approach to Prairie Canada, which found its expression in Ottawa's rising interest in the West, while simultaneously the Americans tried to set foot on the lands north of the border. Canadian expansionism met with American annexation.

4.5. "Canadians are looking for new worlds to conquer"

In either case, the press played an important role. *The Globe* (Toronto), for instance, started campaigning for an opening of the West in the 1850s with slogans such as "Canadians are looking for new worlds to conquer" (qtd. in Owram 47). Consequently, the Prairies remained no longer an obscure region beyond the borders of civilization but were now seen as the natural extension of the *hinterland* surrounding the centres in the East where a steadily growing expansionist movement had its strongholds. Prairie Canada had gone public. Due to the primarily economic motivation of the expansionists, the Indigenous peoples of the West received hardly any attention, whereas the Hudson's Bay Company was quickly identified as the main opponent to progress and the benefit of the empire. The former Selkirk Settlement was no longer conceived as an isolated oasis in the midst of an uninhabitable "wilderness" but as the first of many more settlements to come. In this way, the past was ideologically connected with a future Canada *a mari usque ad mare*—with an expanding railroad system as its technological prerequisite and material proof.

Inspired by Canada's new expansionist programme, nationalist tendencies were quickly set free and when a pressure group like *Canada First* was founded in 1868, it became clear that nationalism and expansionism had undergone an inseparable symbiosis. Among the founding members of *Canada First* was the poet Charles Mair (1838-1927) whose vision of the Prairie region is vividly reflected in his often cited statement: "Wheat is Empire" (qtd. in Owram 127). With this in mind, it is only consequential that the traditional life of the Indigenous peoples of the Plains would come under attack and, in reverse, that the latter would react accordingly. From south of the border, Canadian expansionism was challenged by an ongoing debate about a possible annexation of the Canadian West. Viewed from an American perspective that was ideologically rooted in the country's doctrine of the so called manifest destiny, Prairie Canada offered itself as a natural extension of Minnesota into the North.

4.6. The Red River Insurrection/Manitoba Resistance

Apart from a steadily growing uneasiness, which both the Indigenous as well as white settlers of Red River felt about the activities of *Canada First*, they were particularly afraid of a new land surveying and land distributing policy modelled on the American grid system[3] that would become effective once the

[3] The grid system divided the land into a "grid" of parallel lines running east to west and north to south, each a mile apart, which sectioned the land into one square mile areas

Prairies were opened for large scale immigration. Moreover, what had really aroused their temper was the fact that they had no voice in the consultations concerning the transfer of the land to the new authority. The terms were solely negotiated between Ottawa, London, and the Hudson's Bay Company. From a retrospective point of view, it appears safe to suggest that the following Métis unrest might have been avoided had Ottawa taken a more sensitive stand and respected the concerns of the Red River settlers. Instead, forceful action was taken, motivated by the Métis' attempt to secure their own terms. They felt that an enforced immigration would probably expel them from a country which they claimed as their own.

The Manitoba Resistance/Red River Insurrection[4] commenced with the rejection of a Canadian land surveying party by the Métis who declared that the Canadian Government had no right to make surveys without the expressed permission of the people of the settlement. Furthermore, when the newly appointed Lieutenant Governor William McDougall (1822-1905) tried to enter the Red River Territory, the Métis did not grant him access. Instead, they ushered a short note stating:

> Monsieur – Le Comité National des Métis de la Riviére Rouge intime à Monsieur McDougall l'ordre de ne pas entrer sur le Territoire du Nord-Ouest sans une permission spéciale de ce Comité. Par ordre du président, John Bruce. Louis Riel, Secrétaire. Daté à St. Norbert, Rivière Rouge, ce 21^{e} jour d'octobre, 1869. (qtd. in Stanley, *Birth* 43)

Upon closer scrutiny, it becomes obvious that the Métis did not deny McDougall access to Red River *per se* but made his entry dependent on a prior consultation of the Métis National Committee which had previously been established. The Métis had no intention to rebel against the Crown, just as they did not side with the American annexationists. They were primarily focused on an entry of Red River into the Canadian Confederation, based on mutual consultations and a recognition of their own objectives. The Métis felt betrayed by the Hudson's Bay Company, yet they remained loyal to the British Crown, while, at the same time, they developed a severe distrust in the trustworthiness of Ottawa. In consequence, they founded a Provisional Government which was to represent the Red River Colony and to conduct negotiations with Ottawa.

(640 acres each), within which a "quarter section" (160 acres equals 65 hectares) comprised one homestead.

[4] In historiography, either of the two terms is used, depending on whether a Canadian or an Indigenous perspective is applied.

On 8 December 1869, Louis Riel (1844-1885), their charismatic leader, presented a proclamation modelled on the American Declaration of Independence, which included the offer "to enter into such negotiations with the Canadian Government as may be favourable for the good government and prosperity of this people" (qtd. in Stanley, *Louis Riel* 77).

Prime Minister Macdonald, who was afraid of an American intervention, had to respond to the demands of the Métis, which included "guarantees for the French language and the Catholic religion, an issue of land in recognition of the aboriginal rights of the half-breeds, and the entry of Red River into Confederation, not as a colony, but as a province . . ." (Flanagan, *Diaries* 10). The Manitoba Act was thus legalized, and, on 15 June 1870, Red River became the new Province of Manitoba. This meant a great success for the Métis, a success that is closely connected with the name of Louis Riel who would have evolved as hero had it not been for the death of Thomas Scott (1842-1870).

Scott, an "obstreperous Orangeman" (Flanagan, *Diaries* 10) of Irish descent, had participated in two minor revolts against the Provisional Government and had tried to threaten Riel's life. Therefore, Riel decided to state an example and had Scott executed by a Métis firing squad. This decision proved to be of fatal consequences. It raised the anger of the Ontario Orangemen who were not without influence on Macdonald's government and prevented Riel forever from playing "a full legitimate role in the politics of the Dominion" (10). He had become a wanted man. Between 1871 and 1881, Riel was thus moving between Canada and the United States, took American citizenship and adopted a new middle name. "David" became the symbol for those visions and ambitions that turned him into a religious fanatic and an heretic in the opinion of many Canadians and the Catholic Church. According to him, the Métis were the chosen people, with himself as their prophet. Such notions were responsible for his temporary confinement to mental asylums.

5. 1885: WARFARE IN THE WEST AND THE DEATH OF A MÉTIS LEADER

During the 1870s, conflicts had been extended further west. Parallel to the near extinction of the buffalo, Canada's Natives had lost ground to the free traders. They had been exposed to alcohol and many of them were in a state of starvation. Similarly, the Métis found it difficult to adapt to the challenge of a pure settlement culture, which had become increasingly dominant with the steady intrusion of new immigrants from the East of Canada. Unfortunately, the government in Ottawa ignored the grievances of Native Canada. Therefore, both the Métis and some of the First Nations—notably some of the Cree assiociated with chiefs Big Bear/Mistahi-maskwa (c. 1825-1888) and

Poundmaker/Pîhtokahanapiwiyin (c. 1842-1886)—were prepared to take militant action and the Northwest Rebellion could be held back no longer.

The war of 1885 was the culmination of a complex struggle that had arisen over the previous two decades between the people of the Northwest and the industrial rulers of Ottawa. Western protests were made by local merchants, farmers, settlers, workers, Indians, and Métis, and their demands essentially centered around the need for a responsible government to make economic and land reforms. The hostilities proved to be an important turning-point in the social and political development of Canada. The new rulers established capitalism in the Northwest, which paved the way for modern agriculture and industrialism to expand through the private enterprise system (Adams, *Prison* 70).

When Riel returned to Canada in 1885, he made great efforts to put his religious visions into practice. At the same time, he was concerned about the improvement of conditions in the Northwest. In essence the rebellion of 1885, which turned out to be a political as well as a spiritual movement, was a failure. This can at least be partially blamed on Riel, who had not fully perceived that the situation had changed during the years of his exile. What was new in 1885 was the fact that the Canadian government could make use of the transcontinental railway, which meant that Ottawa was able to send loyal troops to Saskatchewan within a short time. Furthermore, the Canadian military could employ the devastating Gatling Gun—a predecessor of the modern machine gun.

Even worse, Riel rejected the strategy of his military leader Gabriel Dumont (1837-1906), who was an important political figure among the Métis of the South Saskatchewan River. He had pleaded for guerilla warfare. Such tactics would have been extremely effective with the kind of green soldiers—the clerks and shopmen of Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg—who were marching fearfully into the wilderness as the major part of the Canadian army. Instead, Riel was convinced that, with God's grace, bloodshed could be avoided and that the Canadian government would be willing to enter negotiations. As already indicated, in this point he proved fatally wrong. Therefore, he brought about his own downfall and that of the Métis by declaring a policy of violence and then shrinking from the consequences. For three days, Dumont and his men held out against superior forces until their ammunition ran out—Riel surrendered.

When Riel was tried for high treason, he was eager to declare that the rebellion had been well justified. He evidently believed that his case could be instrumentalized politically and that the federal government would not dare to pronounce the sentence, particularly since the trial did not take place in Ottawa but in Regina, where he had many followers. Yet, he was wrong again. The jury consisted of six Anglo-Saxon protestants and as one of them was to confess fifty

years later: ". . . we tried Riel for treason, and he was hung for the murder of Scott" (qtd. in Lusty 23). This happened on 16 November 1885. Ninety-four years later, the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan came to the conclusion that the "make-up of the Prosecutors and the Defense was . . . emblematic of and set the stage for one of the greatest political trials ever to be performed in Canada, at the expense of Louis Riel and the Métis Nation" (Assn. of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan 12).

Viewed in context, both Riel's fate and the political unrest that is connected with his name should be placed within the general realm of nineteenth-century imperialism, the successive clash of different social and economic practices, and the tragic consequences provoked by the confrontations between central Canada and its western periphery. The defeat of the Métis and the First Nations in the Northwest Rebellion completes a culturally destructive development that began with the foundation of the Selkirk Settlement, and it is more than a mere coincidence that Riel's death was accompanied by the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, as this event marked the end of the old order in the Northwest. Additionally, it needs to be acknowledged that the Métis resistances of 1869-1870 and 1885 form the initial stages of a history of protest that has accompanied the emergence and development of western Canada. It points at the regional dimension of the new confederation and carries well into the twentieth century. Winnipeg-based historian Gerald Friesen, for instance, has argued:

> The case for prairie regionalism is usually made by reference to moments of significant public protest: the Métis resistances of 1869-70 and 1885, the farm and labour and religious outbursts after 1918, the rise of third parties in the 1930s and 1940s, the emergence of provincial rights and secessionists in the 1970s and early 1980s. ("The Prairies as Region" 171)

After long years of struggle and endeavour, the Métis eventually reached the point, where they became recognized as Aboriginal people. This happened on 19 September 2003 via a decision of the Supreme Court of Canada. Furthermore, in subsection 35(2) of the Constitution Act (1982), it says: ". . . 'aboriginal peoples of Canada' includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada" ("Rights of the Aboriginal Peoples").

6. NARRATING MÉTIS RESISTANCE IN LIFE HISTORIES, POETRY, AND FICTION

In compliance with historicist approaches to readings of the past, historiographic accounts of historical evidence are pre-eminently based on the analysis of

respective source materials, thereby signalling an objectified treatment of the latter. And yet, depictions of factually approved data, events, and people operate with emplotments which make use of different narrative conventions, depending on the kind of (hi)story that is to be conveyed.[5] At the same time, it must be acknowledged that nowadays historiographic accounts of Métis history are considerably revised and cherished.[6] This is not least due to the impact of Native scholarship which employs holistic worldviews and makes deliberate use of alternative source materials (e.g., oral stories). Such a development can also be read as an expression of a century-long resilience against suppression, whereby the perpetuation of cultural traditions has played a major role.[7]

Among the first Métis scholars who resisted ethnocentric mainstream versions of (hi)story was Howard Adams (1921-2001), whose *Prison of Grass: Canada from a Native Point of View* appeared in 1975 and quickly became a "controversial and provocative bestseller" (Adams, *Prison*, duskjacket). This judgement points at the general orientation of a work that attempts "to examine history and autobiography and their intersection with colonization" (*Prison* 6). In consequence, Adams is, for instance, highly critical of the Catholic Church which he experienced as a suppressive force during his childhood years in the small Métis community of St. Louis (Saskatchewan). According to him:

> . . . the parish priest . . . ruled over his halfbreed flock like a king. . . . In our naivete we regarded our priest as superior and invincible. This kind of ghetto mentality and subservience crushed any interest we might have had in politics, which might have led to control of our own affairs. We accepted the belief that we were incapable of administering our community and this religious domination controlled our daily lives, suffocating our social development. Throughout my childhood, I was conditioned to relate to these religious authorities according to the principles of colonialism and white supremacy. (*Prison* 30)

Reflecting Adam's materialist approach to reading his own past, the account given in *Prison of Grass* is not quite in keeping with what other Métis scholars have observed. Likewise, Diane Paulette Payment argues in a later study on the history of Batoche, which "lies at the core of the Métis identity in Western Canada" (Racette), that the conduct of the local clergy was ambivalent. The

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[5] See the works of White.

[6] See, for example, *Macdougall*; *Payment*, *Batoche*; *Free People – Li Gens Libres*; *Free People – Otipemisiwak*; Redbird; Assn. of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan; Sawchuk, Ferguson, Metis Assn. of Alberta, and Sawchuk; St-Onge, Podruchny, and McDougall.

[7] See Klooss, "'Métissage.'"

parish priests were biased, and, at the same time, they were the only ones "to support the Métis before governmental or other outside agencies" (Payment, *Free People – Otipemisiwak* 131). This notwithstanding, Howard Adams needs to be credited for offering an altogether alternative view on the history of western Canada that locates Métis resistance in the second half of the nineteenth century within the broader context of colonialism and especially at the cross-hairs of two competing economic systems:

> At the base of the trouble was the conflict between two different economic systems – the old economic system represented by the Hudson's Bay Company and the new industrial system. This new ruling class of British financiers and Canadian industrialists had consolidated its position in Eastern Canada and was now extending its empire westward across the prairies. (Adams, *Prison* 50)

Furthermore, what distinguishes Adams's studies of Métis and Aboriginal history in Canada[8] is his deep regional rootedness, i.e. his emotional attachment to the land and people on the banks of the South Saskatchewan, which shows in a kind of writing that combines academic analysis and personal experience, "[interweaves] life histories" (Lutz, Afterword 299) and sees in political commitment a way to overcome alienation and colonization.

In contrast to what is expected from historiographic works, it is taken for granted that, in literary discourse, the presentation of historical subjects is shaped by their fictionalization. This shows already in "Falcon's Song" which, reportedly written on the night following the event, is the first literary response to the Battle of Seven Oaks. Originally not disseminated as a written text, it is part of a set of oral works like "Lord Selkirk at Fort William," "The Buffalo Hunt" or "La Danse des Bois brulés," which are attributed to Falcon as well, and which in the meantime have become part of western Canadian folklore.[9] Louis Riel also wrote a song during the 1885 Resistance entitled "Sur le champ de bataille," a farewell song written on the eve of his execution, in which he commented on the atrocities of warfare.[10] Either of these works is highly partisan. Especially Falcon makes it a point to serve the national cause of the Métis by heroising the bravery of Grant's men.

In as much as a political activist, orator, scholar, and writer like Howard Adams rejects any kind of religiously inspired worldview, the contrary is true about a messianic leader like Louis Riel whose ideological orientation and political activities are deeply instructed by his Catholic faith. This becomes

[8] See also Adams, *Education* and *Tortured People*.

[9] See Fowke, Mills, and Blume; MacLeod; Whidden.

[10] See Whidden (*Métis Songs*, *Virtual Museum*).

also apparent in his literary works, foremost in his lyrical attempts. In the poem "Du Dieu du ciel la Providence" (1875-1878), for instance, it reads:

> Chez les Métis, l'État, l'Église
> De tout temps, n'ont jamais fait qu'un.
> Tous deux avaient pour entreprise
> De sauver les droits de chacun.
> Quand l'Église était offensée
> L'État se trouvait affligé.
> Et la nation menace
> Avait l'appui de son clergé. (Campbell, *Collected Writings* 207)

Among the explicitly political poems in the collection *Poésies religieuses et politiques*, which was published one year after Riel's execution in 1886, there is a very outspoken piece entitled "A Sir John A. Macdonald." Here, Riel blames the Prime Minister and Anglo-Canada at length for the disrespect Macdonald and eastern Canada showed for the Métis and makes them responsible for the hardships they had to suffer. The poem opens with the following stanza:

> Sir John A. Macdonald gouverne avec orgueil
> Les provinces de la Puissance.
> Et sa mauvaise foi veut prolonger mon deuil
> Afin que son pays l'applaudisse et l'encense. (37)

Subsequently, the reader encounters a poetic voice which grows more and more bitter, until an exiled and alienated Riel, who feels betrayed by the Canadian government, calls Macdonald "un vampir" who has left him for dead. Thus, for Riel, poetry serves as a literary valve. He articulates his inner turmoil in his verse. Riel's lyrical writings present "a man not at peace with himself, a man with unattained goals. . . . Riel writes from the heart. His verse is . . . a highly accurate barometer of his inner being" (Campbell, *Tormented Soul* 363-64), whereby religious, political, and ethnic issues are the major subject matters.

Apart from Riel's contemplative, personal poetry, the Métis leader steps into Pierre Falcon's footprints and makes use of his lyrical voice to sing the Métis praise. Challenging a diatribal comment of Macdonald who had called the Métis "half-castes" (A.S. Morton 871), thereby applying a terminology best known from Colonial India, Riel heralds his mixed-blood ancestry in the poem "Le Sang Sauvage en moi rayonne . . ." (Campbell, *Collected Writings* 178-80). Elsewhere, he conceives of the Métis not only as a divinely guided, amalgamated people but understands interracial mixing as a great advantage for the three parties involved—the Métis, the French-Canadians, and the French:

> La nation métisse est neuve.
> Le bon sens, avec la foi, sort
> De son esprit, clair comme un fleuve,
> Il arrosera tout le Nord.
> Je crois que le Métis lui-même
> Fera voir bientôt ce qu'il est.
> Il montera comme la crème
> Monte à la surface du lait. (Campbell, *Collected Writings* 208)

More than one and a half centuries after Falcon's composition of "Le Chanson de la Grenouillère," the "Bard" of the "Prairie Métis" (MacLeod 2) is revitalized in Rudy Wiebe's (1934-) historical novel *The Scorched-Wood People* (1977). The Albertan novelist has Pierre Falcon tell the story of the *Bois brulés* and their leader Riel from beyond the grave, i.e. in Wiebe's fiction the Métis singer and poet resides in heaven from where he relates the story of his people and their resistance against Canada's imperial policy in hindsight and from an omniscient viewpoint.

Again, the emerging narrative is highly biased. Wiebe does not only favour the Métis cause but paints a picture of Riel that is strongly inspired by the author's Mennonite background. According to Wiebe, his "faith in Jesus Christ is . . . the foundation stone of all . . . [his] thought patterns" ("Artist as a Critic" 41). Similar to the approach taken in his previous historical novel on the Cree Chief Big Bear—*The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973)—the author sides with the "underdogs." At the same time, Wiebe's concern for the Natives of western Canada results in a regionally instructed reinterpretation of Prairie history which prolongs in fiction what in historiography is associated with the writings of scholars such as W. L. Morton or, more recently, Gerald Friesen. Asked about his specific interest in Riel and his decision to make Riel and the Métis the subject of his writing, the novelist claims:

> as a Western Canadian, it is clear to me how important the acquisition of the Northwest was to the history of Canada. Manitoba is indeed the keystone province in the sense that it was an essential element in the construction of the country. . . . Riel is important as the leader of a group of people who had the power to prevent the acquisition of Manitoba by Canada. The second point is that the Métis played a crucial role as intermediaries between the Indian and the white civilizations. They were, then, at the centre of the process by which the Northwest – which, we must remember, belonged by right of habitation to the Indians – was taken over by the whites. This in itself makes the Métis and their leader worth writing about. . . . I should mention a third matter. The story of Louis Riel is one of the great stories of the Canadian West, and for me as a novelist, that's reason enough. ("Interview" 83)

Wiebe's reinterpretation of history leads to an especially empathetic picture of the Métis leader. Riel is no longer the religious fanatic and irresponsible politician of Canadian mainstream historiography. Instead, Wiebe turns him into a charismatic leader and credible visionary who pursues the cause of his people in a reasonable and humanitarian way. Like the Métis and like nineteenth-century Québec, the Mennonite writer accepts Riel as a victim of Ottawa's expansionist policy in the West. He conceives of him as a martyr and develops him into the hero of his novel. Moreover, as a result of his Christian orientation, Wiebe has no problem in demonstrating how Riel, the man of spirit, can dominate Gabriel Dumont, the man of action, who, despite all his practical experience in the buffalo hunt and brilliant military leadership, surrenders himself to Riel's autocratic decisions. Wiebe later justified his Christian idea of heroism in a rather polemic reply to George Woodcock's criticism of character depiction in *The Scorched-Wood People*. For the leftist writer and critic Woodcock, whose acclaimed work on Dumont gives profound insight into the latter's life, it was the military head of the Métis whom Riel should have followed (Woodcock 188-89). Woodcock's view is shared by many Saskatchewan Métis today.

It should be acknowledged that Riel does not entirely dominate the novel. "While he appears on one level as a heroic individual, on the other he is the epic representative of his race" (Keith, *Epic Fiction* 83). Thus, *The Scorched-Wood People* is also a novel dealing with the rise and fall of a nation. Wiebe demonstrates how the economic imperialism of the Canadian expansionists and *Canada First* not only challenged the semi-nomadic way of life of the Métis but easily destroyed the old order in the Northwest.

Wiebe's attempt to present Prairie history from a Native point of view has not only met with approval. On the contrary, it has provoked severe criticism among the Indigenous community, who has accused the writer of an inappropriate appropriation of the Aboriginal voice. And yet, *The Scorched-Wood People* deserves credit, as it belongs to the first fictional works composed by a non-Native author that do not side with mainstream readings of Métis history but, instead, employ a western perspective which is sympathetic of the Métis cause. Since Wiebe knows about the historical development following the Northwest Rebellion, his Métis novel, like *The Temptations of Big Bear*, offers the reader more than just the author's comment on two antagonistic views of Canada and their impact on the Prairies during the second half of the nineteenth century. It relates to contemporary Canada as well. David L. Jeffrey remarks that the further Wiebe goes back into the past, the more his characters are turned into prophets and martyrs whose message is directed at their own people as well as at "us, now in our time" (181).

Four years prior to the release of *The Scorched-Wood People*, a genuine Métis voice had already given testimony of what it means to grow up as a Native

(woman) and to experience white supremacy in western Canada. In her seminal autobiographical narrative *Halfbreed: A Proud and Bitter Canadian Legacy* (1973), the first of its kind, Maria Campbell (1940-) conveys the life of a Métis woman from Alberta. The unfolding story has set an example for further Métis life writings such as Beatrice Culleton's fictionalized account in her novel *In Search of April Raintree* (1983). When *Halfbreed* appeared, Maria Campbell was only thirty-three years old. Under normal circumstances, this would be hardly the age for the recollection of one's past. Yet, similar to the life stories of many Native writers, Campbell could already then look back on an extraordinarily wide range of experiences which, for instance, included a teenage marriage, the birth of three children, and a restless migration between the Prairie provinces and British Columbia, where the unavoidable encounter with Vancouver's "skid row" forced her into alcohol, drugs, and prostitution. On the other hand, this depressing record is effectively counterbalanced by Maria Campbell's rehabilitation and her remarkable emergence as a Métis writer.

Chronologically organized, the actual narrative begins with a factual description of the author's ethnic roots and family background, before Campbell draws a very emotional picture of her formative years in a small settlement near Prince Albert (Saskatchewan). As direct descendants of those Métis who moved to the banks of the South Saskatchewan after the Red River Insurrection, the Campbells belong to the very poorest of their people. They have to make their living on road allowances, i.e. land reserved by the government to be officially used for public roads. Although Maria Campbell's story entails explicit memories of a desperate childhood, which culminate in her fatal statement: "My parents and I never shared any aspirations for a future" (13), she is, nevertheless, eager to point out, how an intact family and the few enjoyments granted by communal activities provide enough spiritual shelter to sustain an otherwise desolate life in abject material poverty. Campbell specifically emphasizes the social function of customs inherited from the oral culture of a nature-oriented people.

The main source of mental resistance, however, is her immediate family, with Cheechum, Maria's Cree-great-grandmother, as its spiritual centre. Maria's father teaches the protagonist how "to set traps, shoot a rifle, and fight like a boy," while her mother makes great efforts "to turn [the girl] into a lady, showing [her] how to cook, sew and knit," but it is Cheechum, Maria's "best friend and confidante, who [tries] to teach [her] all she [knows] about living" (19). Campbell complements this intriguing presentation of a wholesome family with a thorough characterization of the Métis community in its broader spectrum. Information on folk traditions, like wedding ceremonies, weekend dances with string music, or sports competitions, enlighten the cultural and social features of a people as much as references to the conventional role assignments of the two sexes and the Métis rejection of a surplus economy.

The author gives an altogether convincing and complex survey of her Métis childhood in Saskatchewan, which contains even some idyllic moments.

In the following section, however, the few joys and the harmonious family life of these early years are gradually overshadowed by further impoverishment and Maria's growing awareness of Canada's racist attitude towards its Native people. First encounters with the Canadian judicial system and the Mounted Police, who bribe a hungry child with a chocolate bar to denounce her poaching father, are as humiliating as the prejudices which the girl experiences at school. Here, she really learns what it means to be a Métis, namely: to look different, to speak a second class language, to dress shabbily, to eat larded bannock, cold potatoes and gophers instead of brown bread, boiled eggs, apples, or cakes, and, above all, to feel terribly ashamed of oneself.

Like Howard Adams, Campbell is very bitter about the Catholic Church, which, in her eyes, is just another destructive force that has had a major share in the mental domestication and subsequent downfall of the Métis. The author's violent attacks against the Church rest not least on her own experiences with the local priests. Maria is twelve when her mother dies, and although this woman never missed a service, she is denied a funeral mass because she had not been given the Last Sacrament.

Her mother's death and Cheechum's retirement from the family open a third phase in Maria's still young life. Separated from her spiritual guide and overburdened by the new responsibilities in a steadily declining household, she eventually succumbs to the image which a prejudiced society imposes on Native women. Maria tries to escape an existence in shame, but she, in fact, surrenders only to what Beatrice Culleton has one of her white characters in *In Search of April Raintree* classify as the "native girl syndrome":

> It starts out with the fighting, the running away, the lies. Next come the accusations that everyone in the world is against you. There are the sullen uncooperative silences, the feeling sorry for yourselves. And when you go on your own, you get pregnant right away or you can't find or keep jobs. So you'll start with alcohol and drugs. From there, you get into shoplifting and prostitution and in and out of jails. You'll live with men who abuse you. And on it goes. . . . you'll end up [on] skid row! (66-67)

Like many of her people, Maria is a victim of the cynical truth that "the patterns of social interaction and the reality of poverty [limit] severely the possibilities for escape" (Bataille and Sands 124). The dilemma brought about by economic suppression and ethnocide can be reduced to the sarcastic formula: original pride → fear → shame → self-hatred.

Fortunately, it eventually dawns on the protagonist that if she wants to have peace, she has "to search within herself" (M. Campbell 7-8). She finds the

courage and strength to join an AA group and attends the meetings of the Native Friendship Centre in Edmonton, which enable her to develop the kind of historical consciousness that is crucial to an acceptance of the Métis people in their contemporary condition. From here, it is only a short step to the kind of political activism, which Maria had once admired in Native representatives like Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris.[11] For Maria, the previous formula of destruction is gradually replaced by a formula of resistance: historical consciousness → acceptance of ethnicity → political commitment → decolonization.

From a retrospective point of view, Maria Campbell's life story resembles both the author's own struggle for identity which culminates in her autobiography as the climax of her personal search, and, on a more universal level, it reflects Native Canada's strenuous pilgrimage from colonization to decolonization. Written during the heyday of Native activism, *Halfbreed* reflects the political climate of the early 1970s, when Campbell did not find immediate refuge in feminist philosophy or the women's movement but committed herself to political as well as artistic projects—an objective she has pursued ever since. Either of the literary works discussed here demonstrates how writing cannot only describe and comment on historical evidence but can also help to pave the road away from victimization via resistance to liberation, whereby the implicit healing process becomes particularly obvious in Campbell's memoir.

7. CONCLUSION

As the previous narrative suggests, the history of the Canadian Métis evolves as the history of a mixed-blood Prairie people who, once they developed into a distinct nation during the first decades of the nineteenth century, not only encountered colonial threats but reacted with different forms of resistance. The Métis case demonstrates vividly that decolonization rests at the core of colonization. From the very outset, the story of this particular Prairie people can be read as the story of a continuous struggle against conquering forces from outside, be they commercial, political, or religious. Rather than only a spontaneous reaction against oppression like the Battle of Seven Oaks, which would fall under the historical category of *événement*, since 1816, the armed, political, and cultural responses of the Métis to subjection have become part of an ongoing process that could be described with the historical concept of Fernand Braudel's *longue durée*.[12] In this way, resistance becomes a decisive element in the identity formation of the Canadian Métis.

[11] See Dobbin.

[12] For the concept in question, see Braudel, "Histoire et sciences sociales."

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