

Métis identity & experience explored

Known as “Canada’s forgotten people,” the Métis have long been here, but until 1982 they lacked the legal status of Native people. At that point, however, the Métis were recognised in the constitution as one of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples.

A significant addition to Métis historiography, *The Long Journey of a Forgotten People*, includes Métis voices and personal narratives that address the thorny and complicated issue of Métis identity from historical and contemporary perspectives. Topics include: eastern Canadian Métis communities; British military personnel and their mixed-blood descendants; life as a Métis woman; and the ongoing struggle for recognition of their rights, including discussion of recent Supreme Court rulings.

Ute Lischke, an associate pro-

BOOK REVIEW by Virginia Barter

The Long Journey of a Forgotten People
edited by Ute Lischke
& David T. McNab
Wilfrid Laurier University Press

fessor at Wilfrid Laurier University, teaches English, film studies, and German cultural studies. She is the co-editor with David T. McNab of *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal Peoples and Their Representations* (WLU Press, 2005). McNab is a Métis historian who

has worked for more than 25 years on Aboriginal land and treaty rights’ issues in Canada. He is also an associate professor of Native studies at York University.

You will recognise many of the contributing authors to this book as Métis Nation of Ontario citizens. It is refreshing to see a history book with so much emphasis on the Métis experience in Ontario. It makes an important addition to any library.

The Long Journey of a Forgotten People is available in bookstores and online at Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Historians George and Terry Goulet’s newest tome recounts little known characters and events of Métis history like...



If you’ve been looking for a good general book on Métis history, this is one you should consider. This new book by Métis authors George and Terry Goulet is one of the best comprehensive overviews available on Métis history. It’s an excellent reference on all things Métis—easy to read and very well organised. The colourful style of the writers makes it enjoyable for anyone to read.

BOOK REVIEW by Virginia Barter

The Métis – Memorable Events and Memorable Personalities
by George & Terry Goulet
published by FabJob
Calgary 2006

What I really like about this book is its layout. The first section gives a general overview of Métis history and culture and discusses some of the contemporary issues and arguments of Métis identity. The authors’ use of point form and numbering of facts makes it very easy to quickly find the information you want. In the section on “Métis Symbols and their Origins” for instance, there are subsections for: flags, sashes, Red River carts, birch bark canoe, York Boat, Michif language, etc.

The book has a good index and bibliography, as well as a very useful chronology of Métis events from 1670 to 2005. The authors have even included a list of various Métis organisations in Canada. I especially like how the authors have put a separate reference list at the end of each chapter or in some cases even sub-chapters to specifically provide the reader with further sources of research material on the particular subject. In addition each section or topic will often have key points summarised or listed

in point form.

The section “B” of the book deals with memorable key events in Métis history; again each event is dedicated to its own chapter making for easy reference. Each event is pivotal to the evolution of the Métis identity beginning with the early history and continuing right up to the present: The Battle of Seven Oaks; Events after the Battle of Seven Oaks; The Buffalo Hunt; Red River Expedition to the Oregon Country; Free Trade and the Sayer Trial; Battle of Grand Coteau; The Red River Resistance; The Métis Dispersion; The North West Uprising; Constitutional and Government recognition; Supreme Court of Canada decision.

The third section of the book features “Memorable Personalities” such as: Cuthbert Grant, Premier Métis Leader; Pierre Falcon, Bard of the Métis; James Sinclair, Activist and Adventurer; Louis Riel, A Métis Icon; Elzear Goulet, Métis Martyr; Pierre Delorme, Politician and Métis Rights Advocate; Gabriel Dumont, Buffalo Hunter and Mil-

itary Strategist; Thelma Chalfoux, Social Activist and Métis Matriarch; Harry Daniels, Métis Crusader; Tantoo Cardinal, Métis Actor Extraordinaire.

Undoubtedly, there are many more personalities and events that could be included in the book, so perhaps the authors will consider doing a second version someday. Admittedly, they do comment in the book that the memorable events are specific to western Canada—a shortcoming from an Ontario perspective. However, in their criticisms of Métis definitions and political boundaries, they give significant acknowledgement to issues of Métis identity in eastern Canada.

The authors are seasoned researchers who have collaborated on many other books, particularly on Métis history. George Goulet is the best-selling author of *The Trial of Louis Riel, Justice and Mercy Denied*; his wife Terry was the chief researcher.

Battle of Grand Coteau

One of the events that George

and Terry Goulet discuss in their book, is the Battle of Grand Coteau. This is, perhaps, one of the least known Métis historical events, yet one of profound significance in forming the identity of the western Métis as a unique and unified people. The Goulets give especially intriguing details of the famous battle between over 2,000 Sioux warriors and a small group of 67 Métis hunters in the summer of 1851. The Métis won against incredible odds and thereafter were respected by the Sioux as their equals on the plains. Among them was 13 year old Gabriel Dumont who would later become the most famous of Métis military strategists.

The battle occurred in July, 1851, in an area called the Grand Coteau in present day North Dakota. The word “coteau” is derived from the French language and describes elevated land such as a butte, a plateau, or a divide between two valleys. The Grand Coteau is just that, a vast elevation extending over many kilometres, the eastern edge of which is a long escarpment marking the beginning of the second steppe of the North American plains. This was in an area claimed by both the Sioux and the Métis as traditional buffalo hunting territory. Consequently, there was always danger of warring attacks from the Sioux. This was no light matter. As George and Terry Goulet quote from HBC fur trader Alexander Ross, “The Sioux are a bold and numerous race, whose very name has been

the terror of every nation...War is their profession; horses, guns, and hunting their delight.”

The Métis hunting parties were huge, often involving thousands of people—men, women and children. It was their custom to travel in close proximity to each other for protection in case of attack from the Sioux. On this occasion there were three main groups from the Red River area—one from St. Boniface, one from Pembina and another from White Horse Plains. The first two bands (St. Boniface and Pembina) consisted of 1,300 people, 315 of whom were hunters. There were over 1,000 Red River carts as well as horses, oxen and dogs. These two parties headed west from Pembina to join up with the White Horse Group—a group consisting of just 67 hunters and their families. Initially all parties hunted together, but for some reason the small White Horse group split off on their own around the end of June. On July 12th, they arrived at the eastern ridge of the Grand Coteau. It was here the trouble began.

Prelude to the battle

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“Five Métis scouts discovered that there was a huge encampment of Sioux numbering 2,000 to 2,500 not far from their own camp on the Grand Coteau. They immediately alerted their group and throwing caution to the

Goulets' new tome recounts little known characters and events of Métis history

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winds, they approached the Sioux, presumably to parley. The scouts were taken hostage, but two of them were able to escape and fled on their speedy steeds back to their Métis camp.

"When they reached the safety of their camp, they found that hasty preparations were being made under the Chief of the Hunt, Jean Baptiste Falcon (son of Métis minstrel Pierre Falcon). Under his leadership, they were taking measures to defend themselves against the attack that they knew was imminent.

"The Red River carts had been formed into a circle, axle to axle, and slightly angled up from the ground. The shafts were pointed outwards like spears. Poles were shoved through the wheels of all the carts to ensure their immobility and to make penetration by the enemy formidably difficult.

"Pemmican and other supplies were placed between the carts to fill the gaps and fortify the hastily assembled bulwark. Rifle pits were dug by the men in front of the carts to provide the hunters with protection while sniping at their attackers. Meanwhile, trenches were dug under the carts by the women and children to provide them with shelter, and the livestock were placed inside the circle. The Métis had literally 'circled the wagons'.

"A number of Sioux approached the Métis barricade stating that they would release the remaining three prisoners the following day, and indicated they would like to receive something in return, presumably a peace offering. The Métis did not believe them. Métis riflemen

would not allow a subsequent Sioux delegation to come near the bulwark. The Métis were determined to conceal from the Sioux the military preparations they had made in their makeshift fort.

"That night (in which an eclipse of the moon occurred) an attempt was made by the Métis to furtively dispatch scouts to the St. Boniface and Pembina hunting parties to ask them to urgently come to their assistance. These scouts were seen, but sometime later two other Métis were able to elude the Sioux and make it to the other brigades." [But would their help come in time?]

The First Day

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"The next day, July 13th while Father Louis Lafleche (the priest from White Horse Plain who was accompanying them) was administering the sacraments, the Métis scouts warned that a multitude of Sioux warriors was rapidly approaching. Thirty armed Métis huntsmen rode out to meet the lead band of oncoming Sioux, offering them gifts and asking them to turn back. The Sioux refused and, as they continued to approach, the Métis scouts raced back into their camp, corralled their horses, and jumped into their rifle pits.

"The remaining three Métis captives of the Sioux made a break for freedom. Two were successful; the third Jean Baptiste Malaterre, who was riding a slower horse, was unable to make it to safety. His dismembered body was later found with three bullet holes and 67 arrows in it.

"The Indians, painted and decked out for war, did not charge the Métis fortification en masse. Undoubtedly this would have seen the Métis ramparts breached. Instead the Sioux used hit and run tactics, firing off bullets and launching countless arrows at their low-lying, well-protected opponents. This method of attack, which they repeated after an initial fallback, was a failure. In the meantime the Métis sharpshooters picked off a number of Sioux while the Métis women and older children continually reloaded the rifles.

"During the attacks by the Sioux, Father Lafleche urged on the Métis. He went among the carts with a crucifix raised in his hand, energising the Métis hunters and soothing the children. His bravery played a part in discouraging the Sioux. His staunch spirit (together with the eclipse of the moon the night before and a sudden thunderstorm that day) made the Sioux believe that the Métis were supported by a Manitou, a supernatural being.

"Among the 77 riflemen, which now included the

Dudley George's spirit continues to inspire

Ipperwash tragedy spawns fund to provide educational opportunities for Aboriginal youth

In June, the Elementary Teachers of Toronto (ETT) issued a press release in support of the Ipperwash Report. "Teachers in Toronto are extremely pleased with the report of the Ipperwash Inquiry," says Martin Long, President of the Elementary Teachers of Toronto. "It stands as a landmark not only for Aboriginal rights in Ontario and across Canada, but also as a significant contribution to justice for all Canadians."

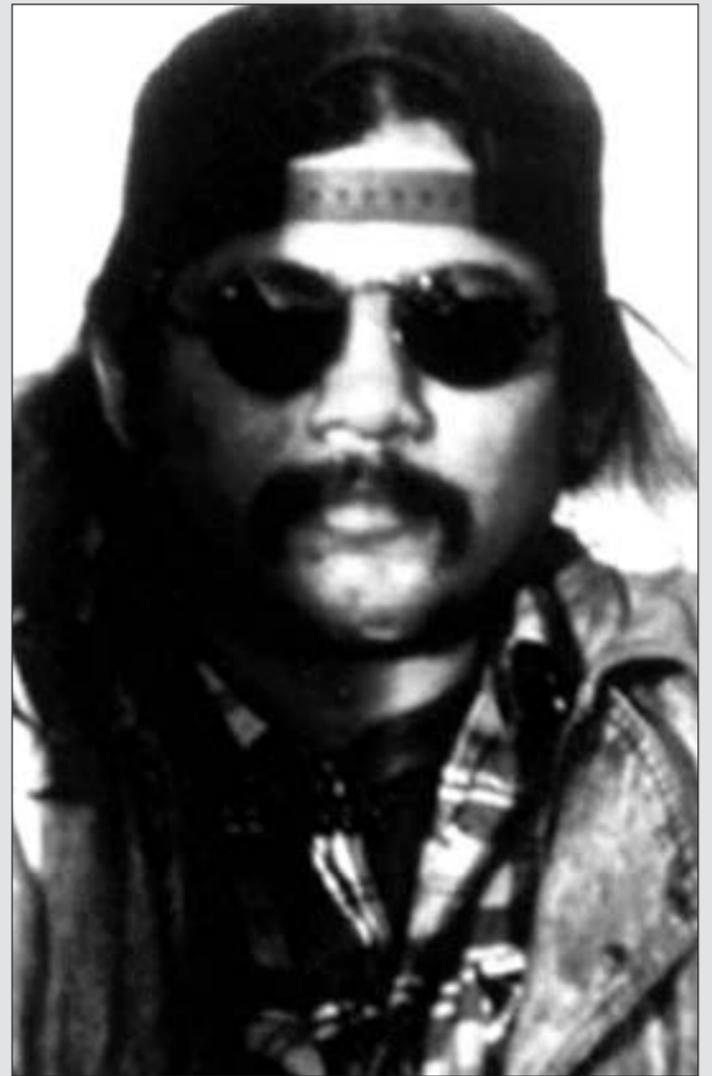
The ETT represents over 11,000 teachers in the Toronto District School Board.

The union has long supported the George family's search for answers to the shooting death of Dudley George by an OPP officer at Ipperwash Provincial Park in 1995.

"When you realise that Dudley was the only native killed in Canada in a land claim during the 20th century, huge questions arise, especially considering the fact that all the natives occupying the park were unarmed," adds Long.

Sam George led the family's call for a public inquiry. The provincial government stubbornly refused to open an inquiry even after the trial of OPP officer Kenneth Deane found him guilty of the shooting and raised questions about the actions of the police and government. In frustration, Sam launched a potentially costly private lawsuit against the OPP, the government and the Premier, Mike Harris.

ETT responded to the family's need for financial help. In 2001 it held a standing-room-only fundraising concert at Con-



vocation Hall to support the Ipperwash Legal Fund. The following year, supporters filled Massey Hall to hear musical greats like Buffy St. Marie and Molly Johnson and to raise more money in support of the lawsuit.

Commenting on these events Sam George noted: "The teachers came along at a very difficult time for us. The concerts raised much-needed funds for our legal action. More than that, they really raised up our spirits at the same time."

With the election of the Liberal Government in 2003 and the out-of-court settlement of the George family's lawsuit, the remaining funds raised by ETT were transferred to the Dudley George Memorial Education Fund, whose mandate was to further educational opportunities for Aboriginal youth.

The fund has supported projects from Ipperwash to Toronto

to Trout Lake in northern Ontario. The Ipperwash program, designed to help ease the transition into high school for Aboriginal youth, has been adopted by communities as far away as New Zealand.

"The fund is doing the kind of work that would have made Dudley smile," says Sam George. Long adds, "We hope Dudley's name and spirit will continue to inspire young people from all backgrounds for a long time to come."

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Dudley George Memorial Education Fund

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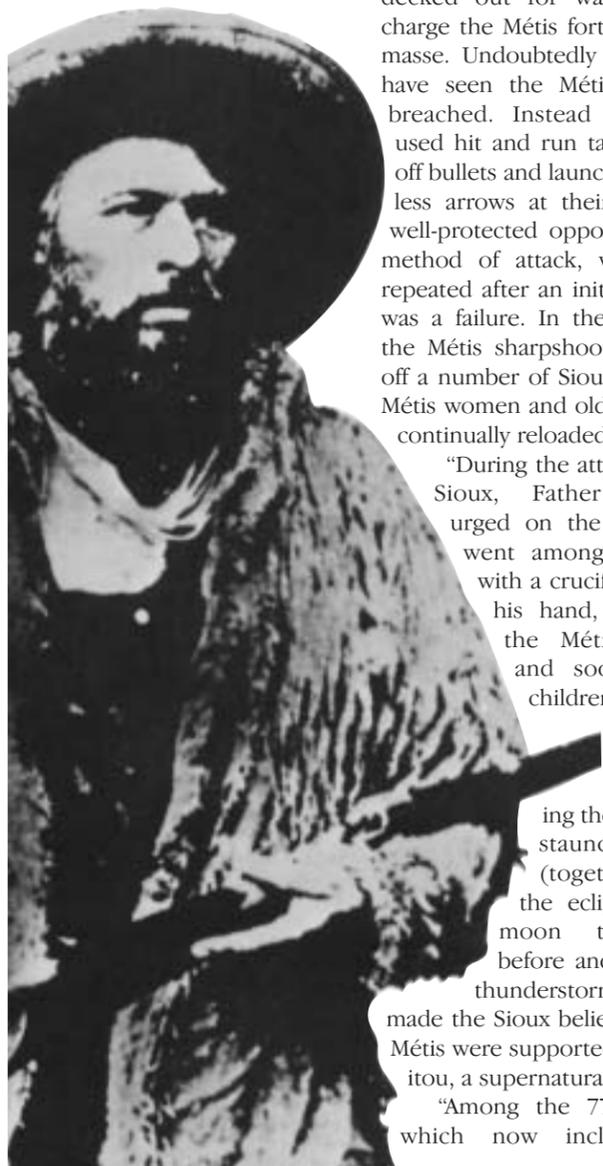
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teenage boys, was not only the senior Isadore Dumont but also his two sons 17 year-old Isadore and 13 year-old Gabriel. Young Gabriel was destined to become the great military leader of the Métis during the North-west Uprising of 1885 over 40 years later. Many of the lessons he learned at the Battle of the Grand Coteau, particularly the effectiveness of the rifle pits, he later used during that uprising.

"The Sioux onslaught on the first day of the battle continued for six hours until a heavy downpour, coupled with their losses, caused them to withdraw. However, they continued to whoop and shout all night long, indicating that they were not yet done

with the Métis."

The Second Day

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"Before sun-up the next morning (July 14th) and the return of the Sioux, the Métis decided to make a run for safety to the other Métis parties some 25 or 30 miles away. Sentries were dispatched to watch for the approach of the native warriors, while Red River carts were hastily readied, after which they quickly departed.

"However, it was not long into their flight before their sentinels warned them that the Sioux were in hot pursuit. The same procedure of circling the wagons, as they had used the day before, was quickly implemented by the

Métis.

"The Sioux charged, again using their hit and run technique. This method of attack was of no value against the fortified barrier of the Métis and their rifle power. The Métis marksmen were deadly accurate with their rifles, and continued to gun down their opponents while suffering no casualties themselves, except for some livestock.

"After five hours of attack on this second day, the Sioux had sustained enough carnage. In a gesture of peace, a chief approached and conceded victory to the Métis.

"The Sioux retreated just as another torrential downpour

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THE SIOUX & MÉTIS WARS

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erupted. Almost immediately after, a large group of Métis hunters from the Red River and Pembina parties belatedly galloped on to the scene. It was decided not to pursue and seek revenge from the unsuccessful native adversaries, but to carry on with the buffalo hunt.”

Aftermath



“The exact number of Sioux casualties is not known, but has been estimated at 80 killed and numerous wounded, and the loss of dozens of their horses. They had

been emphatically repulsed. This battle forever ended warfare between the Sioux and the Métis. This triumph made the Métis the undisputed lords of these plains and of the buffalo herds in this [area] and the nearby Turtle Mountains.

“Astonishingly, the Métis did not lose one man, woman or child during the lengthy onslaughts. However, several were wounded and a number of their horses and oxen were killed and the unfortunate Malaterre had been killed by the Sioux before the battle started.

“The Métis who fought for

their lives at the historic Battle of the Grand Coteau, figuratively wore badges of honour and courage. Their valiant actions in this dramatic conflict were an accomplishment par excellence and vividly exemplified the fighting spirit of this unique people.”

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As you can see from the excerpt above, the authors combine good narrative writing with historic detail. As an introduction to Métis history, or for those intent on finding out more about the origins of our people, this book is recommended. ∞