FURROWS OF STONE: RACE, POLITICS, AND THE ALBERTA MÉTIS LAND QUESTION, 1932-1936

by

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ABSTRACT

In the 1930s, impoverished, landless Alberta Métis united to form a political movement. The aim of its members was to gain title to the land they had historically occupied. The movement’s leaders also hoped to use the land issue as a catalyst to revive a nationalist consciousness among Métis.

Viewing aboriginal political organization as a threat, the Alberta government appointed a Royal Commission to diffuse this challenge. Ostensibly an investigation of Métis destitution, the Ewing Commission served as a blueprint to assimilate the Métis.

This project examines how the Commission, underpinned by racist discourses, was able to redraw the land issue as a failure of the Métis to adapt to white society. By reframing arguments and redirecting blame, the Commissioners were able to justify creation of a land relief program that would not only act as a tool of assimilation but effectively absorb Métis political ambitions.

Keywords: Métis; Aboriginal history; Ewing Commission; Alberta history; assimilation policy
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FURROWS OF STONE: RACE, POLITICS AND THE ALBERTA MÉTIS LAND QUESTION, 1932-1936

The Province of Alberta today is the location of eight provincially recognized Métis communities. These communities are unique in the history of Canada, representing the only successful state sponsored land cession to the Métis in their history. That these communities exist at all is a testament to the political struggle of the Alberta Métis and their leaders in the 1930s. Yet Métis historian Duke Redbird has characterized the existence of these settlements as a “failure, a successful failure perhaps, but a failure equalled only in Métis history to the defeat at Batoche.” Given the fact that Batoche marked the loss of Métis lands and the Alberta settlements marked its reclamation, such a statement may seem problematic. But in Métis history the issue of land has always been problematic. Land has served both to unify and divide the Métis as both a people and a nation.

Historically this was never more true than in the case of the Métis of Alberta in the 1930s. At the height of the Great Depression they undertook a process of self determination in response to their growing social, economic and political marginalization. Lacking local leaders, the Métis communities looked to other educated and politically aware Métis to aid them in their struggle. Some of these leaders, while committed to localized issues, at the same time sought to employ the

land issue as a catalyst for the creation of nationalist Métis political movement. Organizing themselves as the Métis Association of Alberta (M.A.A.), they sought to renegotiate the conditions of their lives and challenge the power of the state.

Rising to this political challenge, successive Alberta governments sought to effectively limit the political aims of the M.A.A. by reconstituting the land issue to their own advantage. In this period the land question would be redefined as a program of relief that Alberta politicians would direct as a means to assimilate the Métis into the fabric of white society. As a case study, an analysis of how the state was able to defeat Métis aspirations through the creation and management of a racialized political discourse can be used to explain the “successful failure” of the Métis. The creation of A Royal Commission Appointed to Investigate the Conditions of the Half-Breed Population of the Province of Alberta, more popularly referred to as the Ewing Commission, was, therefore, about much more than land.² The stated purpose of the Commission was to investigate the life, welfare, health and education of the Métis population of Alberta was more than it seemed. It was a complex, medical, legal, and social exercise which historian Ken Hatt has described as pathogenic.³ The intent was to identify the reasons for the “Métis Problem,” that is, the cultural failure and social backwardness of the Métis; assess blame and provide solutions, not for the Métis but for white society. The solutions, it will be shown, were founded upon a foundation of racism which permeated the Commission hearings, directing its investigations and predetermining its outcomes. Those

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solutions would result in a program of political and social isolation and assimilation, whose purpose would be a final solution to the "Métis Problem."

The Métis, also referred to as Mixed-bloods, Mixed-race, Half-Breeds, Chicottes and Bois Brulees, have always been closely connected to the land. Historically, the Métis occupied an extensive land base in the hinterland of the Canadian west. Over a fifty year period, 1870-1920, which coincided with the European settlement in this region, the Métis struggled to define, then defend, and finally lose this land base, leading to political, social, and economic dislocation. In the words of historian George F.G. Stanley, the struggles of the Métis were the "last effort of the primitive people of Canada to withstand the inexorable advance of white civilization." This view of the Métis land issue has coloured Canadian historiography to the present day. Yet this image is false. The Métis of Canada has consistently attempted to have their collective identity recognized by the Canadian government and its legal system. In every instance the claim to Métis identity, and therefore Métis nationhood, has been tied to the acquisition and preservation of the land they inhabit. And since the foundation of Canada, the Canadian state has sought to undermine those claims.

A biracial aboriginal population, most often the result of contact between European men and aboriginal women, was present in North America from the earliest days of contact. In many cases these people formed distinct communities, neither wholly European nor wholly aboriginal. These people became an important link in the chain of contact between European and aboriginal populations. But it was only on the Great Plains of Canada and its periphery that a distinct group of

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these people, taking for themselves the name of Half-Breed or Métis, grew in sufficient number and political consciousness to forge a national identity. It was in the Red River settlements and the trading posts of the interior that they were, by dint of their numbers and their political will, able to gain political power. That power was a challenge to the emerging nation state of Canada that laid claim to the Métis heartland. The strength of those Métis numbers and the weakness of the Canadian government’s de facto claim to those territories meant that the Canadian government was forced to recognize their claims as legitimate and negotiate with them or risk forfeiting its own nation building efforts.

With the support of the Métis population, their leader Louis Riel was able to negotiate the entrance of the Red River into Confederation as the Province of Manitoba in 1870. He was also able to negotiate the awarding of 1,400,000 acres of land in the province to the Métis in recognition of those rights. The land settlement was proof of the power of the Métis, but that power was to be short lived. In the months and years following the founding of Manitoba, the government of Canada would evolve new strategies to undo the bargain they had sealed with the Métis and to take steps to ensure the Métis would never again be able to challenge the power of the Canadian state.

The Manitoba Act of 1870 was the first Canadian legislative act that specifically recognized the land rights of the Métis and reflected the logic that had guided the treaty making process for other aboriginal people. In setting aside 1,400,000 acres of land for the benefit of Métis people, the Manitoba Act clearly

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stated that the purpose was to expedite the extinguishment of the aboriginal title to the lands of the province. It was also clearly presupposed that this extinguishment would also result in the assimilation of the Métis and with it, the destruction of their political power. Riel, fearing the motives of the Canadian government, wanted to ensure that the land would be transferred en bloc, to ensure the cultural and political integrity of what he referred to as the Métis Nation. The tragedy for the Métis would be that Riel would be physically absent in the crucial period of the land distribution. There would be no one with the vision or political acumen to act in his stead. Without strong leadership, the cause of Métis nationalism was doomed. Redbird has argued that this failure in leadership was the key to explaining the disintegration of the Métis nation between 1870 and 1885. The fact Riel was unable to marshal the level of support on the Saskatchewan River as he had at Red River was proof of this failure. Dobbin called the last stand at Batoche, too little, too late.

To ensure that the Métis would not be able to use the land as a basis of a “nation” in the broadest sense of the word, the Canadian government, from the very beginning engaged in continuing acts of duplicity to deprive the Métis of their land and the power that would flow from it. Rather than releasing the Métis land after the admission of Manitoba in 1870, the Canadian government employed delaying tactics for nearly seven years.

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7 Ibid., 188.
Sawchuk has shown that this procrastination had fatal effects for the Métis. Many Métis were part of a “mobile community.” As hunters, trappers, guides and teamsters, they were forced to follow the demands of their occupations, occupations that were increasingly under threat due to the expansion and occupation of the Canadian nation state.\(^\text{10}\) While dragging its feet on Métis land, the Canadian government, under the auspices of the Dominion Land Act, threw the doors to occupation open to immigrants. The Dominion offered free land on the Prairies and new settlers flooded in, reducing the Métis to a minority population in a few short years.\(^\text{11}\) If the timing of the land release had weakened the Métis attachment to their land, then the method, by which the Crown proffered it, would kill the attachment.

The treaty making process at Red River in 1869-1870 was far different than that made with other aboriginal people. In return for extinguishment most aboriginal people negotiated for large tracts of contiguous land and special consideration, such as cash payments and education. Driben has argued that the Crown did not pursue this avenue with the Métis because of cost considerations and the fear of Métis political power.\(^\text{12}\) The Crown wished to ensure that they would not give land to a nation but rather to individuals. So rather than offering treaty, the Dominion offered scrip, instead of a promise of nationhood, a warrant of death.

In its simplest form, scrip is a promissory note that acts as a credit for currency, real goods, or property. The issuance of scrip to the Métis was not unique. From its beginnings, the Canadian government undertook a number of scrip


\(^{11}\) Ibid., 35

\(^{12}\) Paul Driben, “The Nature of Metis Claims,” 188.
programs, including scrip for settlers, indigents, civil servants, and soldiers. Scrip was most commonly issued in the form of money scrip or land scrip, redeemable for land held by the Dominion government. It was most often issued in allotments based on the notion that an acre of Dominion land was equal to one dollar. It was generally redeemable in amounts of 80, 160 and 240 acres and alternately in cash amounts of $80.00, $160.00, and $240.00.¹³

Beyond the fact that the scrip was being issued to the Métis to extinguish aboriginal title, scrip also presented two problems which would ultimately prove fatal to their survival as a nation. In the first instance, land scrip was not issued for a specific section of land, meaning that Métis who had occupied a piece of land, often for generations, found that they did not in fact hold title to it. Rather the scrip was issued to a recipient based on what land was available at a land office. Overnight, whole communities were broken up, since the scrip holder had to accept new land at some other location. There was also no guarantee that the land traded for scrip was in an accessible location, or that it was useful for farming. Métis who had been farming the fertile Red River Valley for generations found themselves effectively landless.¹⁴

Secondly, the distribution of scrip was placed in the hands of federally appointed Commissioners who were empowered to make decisions of eligibility and award. Often issued on site, the scrip had an immediate cash value. Not only did the Dominion government advertise the location of the scrip issue but the government also provided information to banks and speculation syndicates on the land that

would be available and also acted as a clearing house for the transfer and cashing of scrip payments. It was not uncommon for Commissioners to travel and share accommodations with scrip speculators. The government did not, however, provide any aid, legal or otherwise to the Métis claimants. It is not surprising then, that as much as 90% of the scrip issued to the Métis in the 1870s and 1880s ended up in the hands of speculators, all with the blessing of the Federal government. As doomed as this dream of nationhood seemed, it did not die. The process of Métis nationhood as an idea remained at the edges of memory among the Métis even as they were scattered from their homeland. It would arise again in new circumstances and under new leaders to challenge the power of the state. Like its predecessor it would enjoy success, but like that self same predecessor it would fail in its attempts to give a concrete form to that imagined nation. An examination of the formation of that movement will give some clues to its failure.

The fact that the government of Canada was aware of the problems of scrip policy is beyond doubt. Lieutenant Governor Archibald of Manitoba stated the government’s case succinctly:

He (the half-breed) might make a bad use of it, in many cases he would do so. He might sell it for a trifle. He might misuse the proceeds...that the worse to happen, suppose the men for whose benefit their land was intended should not know how to value the boon conferred, still the land would find its way into the hands of settlers. It would be cultivated and improved.
Certainly it would have appeared that the Métis had no understanding of the value of the scrip, since none ever received more than a fraction of the scrip's real worth. Archibald was not alone in his belief that the Métis were a careless and irresponsible people. They were described as "thoughtless of their own future and incapable of competing in an evolving society." As Stanley summed it up, "The Métis disposed of the scrip to eager purchasers at ridiculous prices content to live for the present at the sacrifice of the future."\(^{19}\)

By the time the scrip was made available, "living for the present," was often all many of them could hope for. By the 1870s, the buffalo, the Métis' main source of income, were gone. The transportation routes that the Métis had controlled for decades became valueless with arrival of the railway. Many Métis, not holding proper title, were forced off their land by immigrants who did. Many Métis were literally starving to death when they sold their scrip.\(^{20}\) In a single generation, the popular image of the Métis as the free and independent lords of the plains was replaced by that of hopeless indigents doomed by the march of progress.

Whatever the actual reasons, the larger white society believed that the failure of the Métis community was the failure of the race, of the inability of the Métis to assimilate into the great civilizing project of nation building. As a reflection of that white civilization, the Canadian government, was by the end of the 19\(^{th}\) century convinced by a Darwinian logic that all aboriginal people were doomed to competitive extinction. It would seem and so it would be that it would be

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., 111.


improvident and fiscally imprudent of any government to slow the disappearance of such a people. As a consequence, throughout the 19th century, the Canadian government would offer inducements and proscriptions to treaty Indians to abandon treaty and become assimilated.21

Not surprisingly and especially in the Northwest, the number of landless aboriginal people continued to grow and their conditions worsened by a situation not of their own making. Nature itself seemed to set itself against the survival of aboriginal people. The animals on whom the Métis relied for food began to disappear, exacerbated by the advance of “civilization” to previously thinly inhabited regions. The decline of the animal population also put an end to the fur economy, which was often the only link that Métis had to the cash economy. For those few Métis who had farms, the persistent agricultural depression of the end of the 19th century made the transition to “civilization” an increasingly troublesome and unlikely enterprise.22 The tragedy grew as many treaty Indians, often blood relations of the Métis, began leaving their reserves. The Crown often was negligent in providing treaty rations and medicine they had promised. Cases of mass starvation, often involving whole communities in the Northwest are well documented in the literature.23 By the last decade of the 19th century, the conditions in what would become Northern Alberta were so desperate that the Catholic Church, which was all but alone in providing aid to the Métis, made repeated requests to the territorial

22 Ibid., 162.
23 Catherine E. Bell, Contemporary Metis Justice, The Settlement Way (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 1999), 8.
government for aid. In response to a letter from the Oblate missionaries requesting immediate relief for 800 Métis living north of Edmonton, agents of the Dominion government reiterated their position that their obligations to the Métis had ended with the issuance of scrip. The current situation that the Métis found themselves in was ascribed to their own habitual improvidence and their tendency to nomadism.

Only when reports of widespread starvation began making their way into the newspapers, was the government moved to action. The territorial government approved make work projects such as road building and swamp drainage. Such enterprises were aimed not only at teaching the feckless Métis proper work habits but were part of a larger plan to open up the Crown land on which the Métis lived to white settlers.

As the frontier steadily disappeared before the advance of European settlement, it became clear that the aboriginal people already there would neither disappear nor remain within the confines of their communities. Facing ever-growing numbers of indigent Métis, the Dominion government took it upon itself to deal with the problem through assimilation of the Métis. The belief in assimilation for the Métis was not new. From the time of Confederation, successive governments had argued for the assimilation of those aboriginal persons who had managed to survive the harsh judgement of "cultural evolution." It was argued that the most effective method by which to accomplish this would be through their transition into farmers. In an age where more than half the population was engaged in agricultural pursuits, such considerations seemed perfectly logical.

24 Metis Association of Alberta, Metis Land Rights in Alberta, 164.
25 Ibid., 164.
26 Ibid., 164.
As early as 1873, Indian Superintendent Provencher advised the Dominion government that:

> the Indian may be civilized and led to a mode of life more in conformity with the new position of this country, and accordingly make them good, industrious and useful citizens...this means to break them of the roving habits, to elevate and assure their position is to attach them to agriculture.\(^\text{27}\)

While it was the goal of the Dominion government to have all aboriginal people properly settled and working the land, the government lacked the financial resources to carry this out. It was these financial concerns that most worried the government. The Dominion government was deeply worried that any further negotiation with the Métis or their representatives would unleash demands for land grants, or worse, the need to bring Métis into treaty.\(^\text{28}\) If the government would have to help the Métis it would be at arm’s length. That task would fall to the Catholic Church. The link between the Catholic Church and the Métis had existed since the earliest foundations of the Métis community. In the aftermath of the failure of the 1885 Resistance and the subsequent diaspora to the Northwest, the Catholic Church, through its missionary orders had followed the Métis as their spiritual protectors and provided what little material comfort they could. Early on, the Church had encouraged the Métis to become settled as an aid to their own administration because the Church lacked the funds to minister to a nomadic population. Ken Hatt argues that in this process, the Canadian government

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supported the Catholic missionaries since it aided in the task of assimilation of the Métis, which was the Crown's ultimate purpose for all aboriginal people.\(^{29}\)

Part of that task would fall to Father Albert Lacombe, an Oblate priest with a long history of working with the Métis in the Northwest. Beginning in the early 1890s Lacombe began peppering the Department of the Interior with requests for aid in settling the Métis in agricultural colonies in the Northwest. Under the grandiose title, *A Philanthropic Plan to Redeem the Half-Breeds of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories*, he offered up a detailed model of a farming project that would correct the "Métis Problem."\(^{30}\) Lacombe argued that gathered together in one location and isolated from white society, the Métis could be properly assimilated. Land would be the keystone of this civilizing project. He also advocated that the land itself be granted to the Catholic Church to be held in trust for the Métis since their history had shown that they were incapable of properly managing it.\(^{31}\) Lacombe assured the government that the Métis "had been well and justly treated by the state, but because of their natural improvidence, they have wasted what they have received."\(^{32}\) What Lacombe was proposing was a partnership that would provide perpetual wardship for the Métis.\(^{33}\)

For their part, Dominion officials were willing to examine the good father's plan for the Métis. The Canadian government had only recently begun the process of formalizing its occupation of the territory and had relied upon Catholic missionaries to provide contact information, and to act as liaisons between the

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\(^{31}\) *Ibid.*, 166.


Crown and the aboriginal inhabitants. At the same time, the Crown was beginning the process to cement their claim through treaty making. It was also expected that in order to defray those costs, another round of scrip issues would be necessary as a cost saving measure, since scrip was seen as a one-time payment while treaty payments were in perpetuity. The solution that Father Lacombe was offering promised an economical means to deal with at least some of the Métis.

It was not surprising, then, that A.M. Burgess, federal Deputy Minister of the Interior, was willing to listen to Lacombe's plan. For his part, Lacombe was prepared to ask for very little beyond land for a colony. His letters stressed not only the economy of the project but the promise that the colony would be self supporting. Burgess extolled the virtues of this plan, which he hoped would be a model for future projects involving aboriginal people, to T.M. Daly, the Minister of the Interior:

The proposal involves no financial outlay on the part of the government, beyond furnishing seed grain and a few implements at the inception of the scheme and therefore would appear to be no great risk in giving the experiment a fair trial.34

Equally impressed, Daly pressed the plan to Prime Minister Laurier, stressing its economy and practicality. For his part Laurier only approved of the release of Crown land which had not been approved for other uses and $2,000.00 in cash. He had, he said, "little faith in the redemption of the Métis."35

In 1896, the federal government formally leased to the Catholic Church land near the Saddle Lake Indian Reserve on a ninety-nine year lease for the nominal

34 Ibid., 170.
rent of $1.00 per year. Despite the enthusiasm of Lacombe and the promise of free
land, the newly christened St. Paul des Métis did not attract settlers in the numbers
Lacombe had hoped for. Lacombe distributed leaflets in printed in English, French,
and Cree that extolled the virtues of the settlement. Addressing the Métis as “dear
friends and children,” he promised them a life “that will afford you an easy living
and you will have the consolation to be at home near your church, your school, and
your pastors.” In a follow up pastoral letter he beseeched the Métis to “once more
listen to the priest who is your true friend. I promise you in advance that you will
again live happy...you shall not be at the mercy of the white people.”

Over time, the colony began to attract settlers and a number of farm projects
were undertaken. Unfortunately, neither the Oblates nor many of their charges
possessed any practical farming experience. No doubt trusting in providence, the
Oblates concentrated on their roles as administrators, teachers, and religious
leaders and let the Métis get on as best they could. From the beginning, however, the
best efforts of the Métis farmers often fell short, not the least because funds initially
earmarked for the farm improvements were instead diverted to Church projects.

Moreover, the priest in charge of the project, Father Therien, seems to have
not only doubted the worth of the Métis as farmers, but as parishioners as well.
Therien’s low opinion of the Métis was cemented in 1905 when the centrepiece of the

Research Centre, 1991), 8.
settlement, a boarding school, was burned down by a group of Métis students. For all of their stated concern for the Métis, Therien and the other priests decided that the only hope for the colony lay in bringing religiously and racially reliable farmers to work the land. To that end, the Oblates began offering farmsteads on the colony to landless Quebec farmers. Only when these farmers arrived, often to claim land worked by the Métis, did the Church’s duplicity become apparent. It was only through the intervention of several outraged Alberta politicians that all of the Métis homesteaders were not turned out. Nevertheless, it was years before any of the Métis who remained received title to the land they had worked.

The colony was a dismal failure, though whether it was the failure of the Oblates or the Métis is still a point of considerable historical debate. Hill has argued that some of the Métis farmers were successful despite the underfunding by the Church, a fact born out by the lists of assets claims by the Métis settlers. Dion Laboucane, for example, owned 1200 head of cattle, Elzear Poitras, 400 head of cattle and 300 horses, Lawrence Garneau Sr., owned 400 head of cattle, 100 horses as well as the town sawmill and general store. There is also considerable evidence that the building of the railway to St. Paul so increased the value of the Church lease that the Oblates sought to profit through its sale to racially reliable white farmers.

Regardless of fault, it is clear that the St. Paul des Métis project was doomed from the start, lacking both the proper financing and support needed for such a

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40 Ibid., 8.
41 Ibid., 8.
44 Ibid., 10.
venture. At the same time, the complicity of the government in constructing this failure must be regarded as equal to that of the Oblates, since the federal government provided the means by which the plan was put into operation. It is clear that the Dominion government acted on the basis of expediency, employing cut rate measures to solve the “Métis Problem,” a problem that it had created. To conclude that the miserly funding of such an enterprise would end in anything but failure is beyond argument. What else is not beyond argument is that hundreds of Métis were again forced off their land into the margins of society, joining thousands of others already there.

It is ironic that while the project was in operation, the St. Paul des Métis colony enjoyed the support of white settlers, who earnestly believed that with proper guidance, the Métis could be civilized and properly assimilated. It is surprising then, that when the project came to an end, many whites blamed the efforts of the Métis for that failure. And yet, decades later, when the Métis land issue was raised again, the St. Paul Colony would figure prominently. The reasons for this as much as the reasons for the reopening of the Métis land question are important because they provide important clues to both the underlying causes of Métis destitution and the logic behind the corrective measures that would be employed by successive governments, all eager to solve the “Métis Problem.”

46 Ibid., 9.
The experiment at St. Paul had offered no solutions for the Métis. Equally, the entry of Alberta into Confederation in 1905 brought no solution to the “Métis Problem,” in fact, the situation became worse. For white Alberta the first two decades of the 20th century were boom times as demand for Alberta wheat and beef grew and grew. New settlers crowded in and new land was opened up for settlement. Like their ancestors in the Red River and the North Saskatchewan, many Métis were again forced to pick up and move to the periphery of the “civilized’ world. Some Métis, judged suitably assimilated to occupy the lowest rungs of the working ladder, moved into the towns and cities. Their place would be tenuous, since they were always the last to be hired and the first to be fired. The boom times of the first two decades of the century give way to economic stagnation, then drought, and the Depression. The Métis were the first to feel this downturn. Vagrancy laws and white hostility forced them back whence they came. They gathered and regrouped wherever they could. More often than not, it was at the edges of white towns and aboriginal reserves, while many others moved onto provincial road allowances, a practice so common place that they were known as the “Road Allowance People.”

The problem of landlessness compounded their misery. Lacking even an address, most Alberta Métis had no access to state relief, education, or medical care. They were now being joined by a continual stream of enfranchised Treaty Indians who had been forced in one fashion or another off the reserves, or due to the inadequacy of treaty payments, had voluntarily left to look for non-existent work or

50 Ibid., 9.
Rather than sympathy, these Métis evoked fear and loathing in their white neighbours, who regarded them as dangerous, disease ridden and incapable of assimilation.

The “Métis Problem” was now so large that the Alberta government had no choice but to acknowledge it, but that acknowledgement was not backed up by any form of help. When the question of Métis poverty had been raised in the 1920s, the Alberta government pointed blame to the federal government that still had formal control over Crown land and resources in the province.

It was only when the federal government finally transferred this control to the province in 1929 that Alberta government was put in the position of having to deal directly with the Métis problem. Resolve to deal with the Métis problem, however, was not initially fuelled by Métis landlessness. The governing party of Alberta, the United Farmers, had been elected with support of farmers and had championed land settlement issues for the benefit of whites, including Great War veterans. Worsening drought conditions in southern Alberta by this time had fuelled the call by their constituents to open up the northern Crown lands for immediate settlement. The land wanted was that occupied without title by the Métis. Unwilling as it was, the government of Alberta would have to finally address the “Métis Problem.”

While the Alberta government was obligated under the terms of the land transfer agreement to honour the federal government’s establishment of Indian

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51 Ibid., 9.
53 Ibid., 9.
55 Catherine E. Bell, Contemporary Metis Justice, 9.
reserves, there had been no discussions regarding the status of Métis, and so, by default, it was left to the province to determine their fate.56  

The path of that destiny began inauspiciously enough in the isolated Métis community of Fishing Lake. Word arrived in early 1929 that the land local Métis had been squatting on for decades was to be opened up to settlement.57 The Métis, few in number and many illiterate, knew too well the fate that was awaiting them, as Métis squatters were routinely evicted from Crown land. But unlike thousands of their fellows, these Métis did not pack up and move on. Instead, they turned to the one man whom they believed could help them. Joseph Dion would be the man who would change the destiny of the Métis in Alberta.  

Dion, a descendent of the Cree war chief Big Bear, was an enfranchised Indian who had grown up on the nearby Keehewin reserve.58 A self-made man, he had been removed from treaty as a consequence of his education, since any Indian who received higher educated was considered civilized and “enfranchised,” that, is stripped of treaty rights. Nonetheless, Dion had remained on the reserve as the federally appointed teacher. He was widely respected on the reserve and in the Métis communities that existed around the reserve’s margins.  

The Métis of Fishing Lake asked Dion to write a letter to the government, imploring, on their behalf, the right to claim title for that land. Receiving little initial recognition from the government, Dion, a man of immense personal conviction and deeply held religious beliefs of right and wrong took it upon himself

56 Ibid., 9.
to further advocate on behalf of the Métis. Dion expected that the plight of the Métis would fall on deaf government ears unless a concerted plan of action to petition the government was put into place. He believed that success would lie in numbers. The families at Fishing Lake were too few in number to attract the attention of government officials. He determined that a large organization with the ability to form strategic political alliances would be necessary tools if the Métis were to succeed in petitioning the government. During the summers of 1930 and 1931, Dion, on his own time and largely at his own expense, began crisscrossing north and west Alberta pressing his arguments for land for the Métis. In every Métis community he entered the same stories of privation and landlessness were repeated. In every community he found support for the cause. Buoyed by this support, Dion organized a general meeting at Cold Lake, Alberta in June 1930 to present a political plan that called for the establishment of Métis controlled farming colonies in Alberta.

By now politically astute, Dion invited the area provincial Liberal MLA, Joseph Dechene, and the federal Conservative MP for Athabasca, Percy C. Davies, to attend the meeting. He wanted to show the men first-hand the power present in Métis numbers. Dechene was well acquainted with Dion and had been elected to office largely due to the support of local Métis. For his part, Davies was facing a federal election in the following month and knew that in the tight race that was predicted, Métis votes would be crucial for victory. Dion hoped that the show of Métis unity and the evidence of their wretched state might convince these politicians

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59 Ibid., 58.
60 Ibid., 60.
to lobby on their behalf. Dion remained naively hopeful that his nascent organization could remain non-political, but the tornado of Alberta politics would determine that he and his followers would be swept into its centre.

Determined to politicize the land issue, Dechene advised Dion that he would accompany him when Dion presented a petition bearing more than 500 signatures to UFA Premier John Brownlee in Edmonton. The petition simply asked for the land in question to be set aside for the sole use of the Métis and requested that the province provide more schools and medical services.62

The arrival of Dion and his petition was not entirely unexpected in the Premier’s office. During the provincial election of 1930, the plight of the Métis had become regular fodder for the newspapers, who had reported that as many as 10,000 Métis were in a state of destitution.63 These stories played not only on the poverty of the Métis, but the attendant disease and moral degeneracy assumed to be a natural condition of the Métis. The government, by not providing aid, and more importantly by attempting to assimilate the Métis were shown to be complicit in the entire “Métis Problem.” Brownlee realized that he could not ignore the problem, but at the same time he understood the political risk of appearing to favour one particular group over another in the allocation of relief. The Depression, which had been thought to be only a cyclical economic downturn, had hit the economy of Alberta particularly hard and did not have the appearance of abating soon. Needing to buy time to formulate a politically sound reply, Brownlee instructed the newly

62 Ibid., 18.
63 Ibid., 19.
created Department of Lands and Mines to undertake a study of the Métis problem.64

The Department responded with the distribution of a questionnaire to be distributed to Métis and non-treaty Indians in Alberta. The questions dealt with land occupation, homestead rights, the receipt of scrip, and attitudes towards farming. The purpose of the questionnaire was ostensibly only to gauge the magnitude of Métis privation, but the nature and wording of the questions, however, pointed to a larger intent of the government to at least entertain the idea of a land settlement for the Métis.65 Why land? Hill has argued that at the height of the Depression, the provincial government had few relief options open to them. Land was cheap, readily available and provided the flexibility and leverage necessary to deal effectively with groups that might possibly challenge the socio-political status quo. Whatever the reasons, from its obscure beginnings the Métis land issue quickly began to dominate political discussion in Alberta and became regular fodder for Alberta newspapers. Newspaper articles on the land issue were of immense value to Dion and his supporters. Not only did they focus white attention on the problem, they were crucial in politicizing the Métis. Sympathetic supporters of Dion, both Métis and non-Métis, carried the message into Métis communities. In a largely illiterate population, these men and women were a vital link in helping to spell out the objectives of this new Métis nationalism.66 These discussions reached a wide audience, in particular a number of young, well educated Métis men, who,

64 Catherine E. Bell, Contemporary Metis Justice, 10.
encouraged by the possibilities of political action, began writing to Dion offering their support.

Scarcely eighteen months after his first meeting at Fishing Lake, Dion found himself the spokesman for thousands of Métis in dozens of settlements across Alberta. While Dion still focussed his attention on the issue of land and relief for the destitute Métis, two of the young men who had joined him saw far greater possibilities for the Métis. These acolytes, Malcolm Norris and James Brady, were already imagining the rebirth of a Métis national movement.

In their first meetings, Dion was impressed by their political sophistication, determination, and commitment to the cause. Proving themselves to be exceptional organizers and planners, Dion readily turned over much of the political organization of the movement to them. Emboldened by their success they pressed Dion to look beyond his limited vision of land for the destitute Métis and instead focus on a wider ranging national political movement. The number of Métis who were flocking to the land relief meetings was proof, they told him, that the Métis were united again as a nation. Swayed by their unwavering belief in the future of the Métis, Dion approved the call for a convention. While land and relief still dominated Dion’s thinking, Brady and Norris were envisioning a new nation.

On December 28, 1932 the Métis emerged from their long political slumber and organized themselves as L’Association des Métis d’Alberta et les Territoires du Nord-Ouest. Representing overwhelmingly English speaking Métis in Alberta, they
soon renamed themselves the *Métis Association of Alberta* (M.A.A.).\(^{67}\) The meeting, made up of hundreds of Métis from all parts of the province, gathered to elect a leadership that would raise the call for land and nation. Joseph Dion, the founder of the movement, was elected first president and Peter C. Tomkins, a descendent of Poundmaker, the great Cree Chief who rose in rebellion with Riel, was elected as vice president, along with Malcolm Norris and Felix Callihoo. James Brady was elected Secretary Treasurer. Their combined talents would yield the necessary ingredients for the mobilization of a powerful political movement.\(^{68}\) As it would unfold, however, it would be Norris and Brady who would seize effective control of the organization and become the driving force behind the struggle for Métis land and nationhood.

Speaking for the new association, Norris demanded for the Métis the rights to land, to hunting, to education, and to health care.\(^{69}\) The petition that was promulgated and forwarded to the provincial government was a bit more guarded. The petitioners requested if, they, the Métis,

> could persuade the government into reserving a piece of land for the settlement of the half-breed only, land they could call their own, and a home to replace the camp along the road allowance. Employment is not what it used to be, we are tired of rambling, we want to settle down.\(^{70}\)

As hesitant as this petition was it represented, after more than two generations, the resurrection of the Métis national struggle. But it would not be the destitute who would make this call. As it was in 1869 and 1885, it would fall to the

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\(^{67}\) Metis Association of Alberta, *Métis Land Rights in Alberta*, 188.


members of the Métis elite to organize and petition. It would be their pooled talents and their vision that alone would propel the movement forward. And of those leaders it would be Malcolm Norris and James Brady who would take on the task of rebuilding the Métis nation as a political reality.

Brady, Norris, Dion, and Tomkins, known collectively as "the Big Four," had been drawn together by the immediate issue of Métis destitution. They had agreed early in their relationship that the fight for land, as a method of alleviating Métis poverty would take precedence over all other issues. But beyond this they differed as much in personality as in politics. Dion was a devout Catholic who was driven by compassion to help his neighbours overcome their grinding poverty. He also believed that a little help and a solid work ethic could raise the Métis out of that poverty. Neither he nor Tomkins were political radicals, and both believed that respectful and patient petitioning of the government would guarantee the success of their project. For their part, Norris and Brady saw the poverty of their fellow Métis as a clear indictment of a racist capitalist system. Both had been radicalized by the racism they had experienced in their childhood and believed that the only way for the Métis to resist such a system was through united political action. In the case of both Norris and Brady, the racism of white society had shaped their early lives. Norris, the son of a wealthy white businessman had been denied the opportunity of a university education by the executor of his father's will, who viewed further education of the half-breed Malcolm as an unnecessary expense. For his part,

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72 Ibid., 62.
73 Ibid., 37.
Brady had been expelled from a white school he attended for daring to stand up to racist bullying.\textsuperscript{74} Brady, a communist, and Norris, a committed socialist saw in the beginnings of Métis political action the potential for true revolutionary action at some future date. Yet as divided as all four men were they agreed, for the time being, it was land alone that would give the movement its unity and strength.

The Métis could be proud of the leaders in their ranks. James Brady, by his early twenties, already a seasoned politician, was ready for the struggle.\textsuperscript{75} His talent for analyzing the dynamics of government, of identifying motives of politicians and providing both dialogue and strategies to the movement would be critical in defining the goals of the movement.\textsuperscript{76} In the early years of the movement, Brady would write a series of letters and papers outlining the objectives of the movement.\textsuperscript{77}

Malcolm Norris, who, like Brady, grew up in privileged circumstances, wore his Métis heritage as a badge of honour, introducing himself to all and sundry as “Redskin Norris.” In common with Brady, he believed socialism was the most potent political tool to bring about not only social change but racial equality for the Métis.\textsuperscript{78} Norris’ oratorical skill would impress friend and foe alike and his spirited call to action from the podium on December 28, 1932 would rekindle the belief that Métis again had a date with destiny.\textsuperscript{79}

For the Métis, few in numbers and without any economic or political power, the task ahead would seem daunting and the Métis leadership were not so foolish as

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 47. 
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 28. 
\textsuperscript{77} Murray Dobbin, The One-And-A-Half Men, 82. 
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 28. 
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 28.
to think otherwise. Brady, borrowing a line from Lenin, advised the association council that the

Métis have no other weapon than organization. In order that they might learn to understand their interest, their position and to pursue their policy, it is necessary immediately and at all costs to reorganize the advanced and interested elements of the Métis, even should this element constitute an insignificant fraction of the Métis. The Métis Association has been the organizer of our struggles--it has in its ranks the most devoted section of our people, ready to sacrifice and able to view the struggle not only in its immediate ramifications but in its ultimate aim in the establishment of our Métis people.80

What Brady meant was that the powers of organization were the only tools available to the Métis with which they could effectively thwart or redirect the powers of the state. Brady saw the land issue as part of a larger overall constitutional struggle. Since the government controlled the arena of struggle whether in the court rooms or the conference rooms, the Métis would always be in an inferior bargaining position, always having to justify their demands. At the same time history had shown that the state had the power to delay or deflect their demands. The problem for the Métis leadership was in organizing effective strategies to challenge the state’s arbitrary control of any proceedings. Brady succinctly stated his understanding of the problem in a letter to Norris:

No capitalist government would ever agree to the complete abolition of the Métis question. Thus it will not be a question of Métis rehabilitation but of restricting certain undesirable sides of the question and limiting certain excesses...objectively no reconstruction of the Métis will come about.81

81 James Brady, “Politics in the Metis Association,” Brady Papers, Glenbow Institute, Calgary.
Brady, writing in 1933, pointed out that in the three years since Dion first began petitioning the province over the land issue, the government had managed to completely direct and dominate the land issue, not only delaying any proceedings, but giving the appearance to the general public that something was being done. What Brady and Norris both feared was that these delaying tactics would either weaken the resolve of the Métis to continue the struggle or worse, cause dissention in the ranks of the leadership. In a letter to Joseph Dion dated March 13, 1940, when Dion had accepted a post as a colony manager with the Provincial Government, Brady would remind him that movements and great causes can only advance when they produce leaders of integrity upon whom the rank and file can trust and rely...the Métis will always be the victims of deceit and self-deceit as long as they have not learned to discover the interests of one of another.

Brady and Norris clearly understood that the momentum of the movement would have to be kept up and clear political plans would have to be initiated to ensure that when the land issue had been dealt with they could still maintain a political direction that would ensure the continuance of the Métis as a political force.82 To that end, they left the social welfare aspects of the Métis in the hands of Dion and Tomkins. For themselves they took on the task of radicalizing the Métis Association. Their socialist studies had convinced them that the Métis problem had to be viewed in terms of a class struggle.83 For Brady the origins of the “Métis Problem” were simple.

The history of the Métis in Western Canada is really the history of their attempts to defend their constitutional rights against the encroachment of nascent monopoly capital...the present misery is the result of that shameful episode of the forward march of capitalism on the prairies.84

83 Ibid., 29.
Land would allow the Métis to exist outside of the capitalism system and allow them to build a new national order free from direct outside political interference. On this issue, Brady and Norris seemed to have had a rather naïve understanding of what sort of community was to evolve on Métis land. There is evidence that they believed that the Métis were naturally a communal people and they would evolve communities much like those that were being created on collectives in the Soviet Union.\footnote{Ibid., 29.}

Regardless of how they saw the final outcome, they believed that an aggressive and organized political campaign was necessary to politicize the rank and file. Dion, who had from the start argued for a careful and measured response to the government, was constantly badgered by Brady to change his thinking. In a letter to Dion in December, 1933, Brady stated,

> We have now arrived at the stage where we must commence the use of aggression...After the conference let us hope we can commence our offensive in earnest. You lament that we have no Riels. Joe we have plenty of Riels and it only requires a little fanning of a spark that would become a flame...I love a good fight and I'm not afraid to meet any damned white man that ever drew breath. Let them get sore, this is only the beginning, Joe.\footnote{Ibid., 30.}

Norris and Brady framed their understanding of the Métis situation from a Leninist perspective. In their view, the fact that Métis had no land, and therefore no control over the social, economic, and political, or cultural aspects of their lives was because of the colonial relationship between the Métis and the state. The men feared that the government would either split the Métis leadership or buy them off. Brady warned about the possibilities of what Malcolm Norris earlier had referred to as a

\footnote{Murray Dobbin, \textit{One-And-A-Half Men}, 76.}
captive leadership. Brady framed the dangers of this captive leadership in reference to colonialism:

Colonialism is a system by which the colonized people have no control over their lives—economically, socially, politically or culturally. The power to make decisions in these important areas of daily life are always in the hands of others.

It was necessary to therefore politicize the Métis rank and file so that the leadership could be properly kept on course and at the same time the membership could be a continuing source of new leadership.87

Brady and Norris understood that the political struggle would be long and drawn out and so emphasized the importance of meetings and assemblies as critical to the survival of the movement. Poverty and geographical isolation had effectively removed the landless Métis from any contact with mainstream society. Broken promises made by politicians seeking Métis votes had created a culture of suspicion in most Métis communities and regardless of their origins, outsiders were viewed with suspicion. To rebuild trust, the M.A.A. forged links with local community leaders to help carry the message to the rank and file.

Métis historian Joe Sawchuk has argued the issue of loyalty was a major stumbling block for the M.A.A. leadership. While both Norris and Brady were committed socialists, they, in agreement with Tomkins and Dion, organized and operated the M.A.A. along British parliamentary lines. This arrangement created a working harmony among the members of the executive, but was not always adhered to by rank and file M.A.A. members, who, Sawchuk has suggested, possessed

extremely strong individualistic and at times, anarchistic tendencies. This individualism, combined with the isolation of these Métis in whose name the struggle was being waged, meant that the risk of the erosion of support over time, or more importantly, in a moment of crisis was very real. Brady believed that the failure of Métis nationalism in 1869-1870 and 1885 was in large in part due to "an every man for himself attitude" that presented itself at the first instance of hesitation by the Métis leadership. In the minds of Brady and Norris, given these sets of circumstances, it would be necessary for the leadership to both create and impose a set of goals on the community so that there would be unanimity in any dealings with the government. 88

Even as Brady and Norris cemented their vision of political action among the leadership of the M.A.A., other members were not idle. Joseph Dion, believing that his friend Dechene's commitment to the Métis cause was as much personal as political, asked him to keep up the political pressure in Edmonton. For his part, Dechene needed little prompting. 89 Realizing the great political opportunity the Métis represented, Dechene had showered the Premier's office with letters calling for more concerted action to aid the Métis. In a letter to Deputy Premier Reid, Dechene advised him that his pressing of the land issue was not an attempt to cause trouble, but rather he was only doing his duty on behalf of his constituents. He stated, "I am their [the Métis'] representative...I will add that I do not have anything to do with this thing." Whether or not Dechene had "anything to do with

this thing” he certainly played a role in pushing forward the agenda of the Métis, but not in a manner that was of his own making, or even something he could have foreseen.

The other political invitee to the M.A.A. meeting in December, Percy Davies, had likewise not been idle. He had been elected to office in 1930, largely as a result of support from Métis voters. From the beginning, he came to see himself as something of a spokesman for the Métis and regarded Dechene as an interloper. For his part, Dechene was equally suspicious of Davies’s motives. Though poles apart politically, both men saw the political opportunities presented by the Métis land issue.\(^90\) Eager to politically outplay Dechene, Davies approached David Milwyn Duggan, Conservative Party House Leader in the Alberta Legislature, and pressed him to push the issue of Métis land in Legislative Assembly. Armed with reports provided by the newly formed Métis Association, and having personally invited members of the press into the legislative gallery, Davies launched into a scathing indictment of the Alberta government’s foot-dragging on the issue of the Métis land question.\(^91\) As much as he played on the sympathy of the plight of the Métis, Davies was not long in racializing the issue. He made particular mention of the endemic respiratory and venereal diseases among the Métis, warning that failure to deal with the “Métis problem” threatened the health and well being of white Albertans.\(^92\) This would not be the first time the Métis would be pathologized nor would it be the last. In a carefully planned move, Duggan addressed the House in February, 1933 and

\(^{90}\) Ibid., 32.
\(^{91}\) Ibid., 40.
\(^{92}\) Ibid., 40.
proposed a motion that a special committee of the legislature be appointed to inquire into the half-breed situation and to report their findings “at an early date.”

Premier Brownlee, caught off guard and embarrassed, was forced to respond to this political gauntlet cast in front of him. From the moment the land issue had arisen, Brownlee and his colleagues had attempted to shift some of this potential burden onto the shoulders of the federal government. Since the federal government had transferred land and resources to the Alberta government in 1930, the Alberta government had concerns about the division of responsibilities should further aboriginal land claims be made for lands now under provincial control. Despite being rebuffed by the federal government on the issue earlier, Brownlee still wanted a solid legal opinion before he moved on the issue. Desperate to buy time, Brownlee personally proposed an amendment to Duggan’s motion saying,

Resolved, that the government should, during the present year, continue its study and enquiry into the problems of the half-breed population with a view to presenting its recommendations to this Assembly at the next session thereof.

Not to be outdone, Dechene, waiting at the sidelines, took to his feet to propose a sub-amendment:

Resolved that the Government should during the next year, keeping particularly in mind the health, education, relief and general welfare of the half-breed population, continue its study and enquiry into the problem and present its recommendation to this Assembly within ten days of the commencement of the next session thereof.

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93 Ibid., 40.
94 Ibid., 43.
95 Ibid., 44.
96 Ibid., 44.
The motion passed and the government found itself committed, however reluctantly, to action. In the public galleries, Malcolm Norris watched. To this point, the provincial government had been dealing behind closed doors and through intermediaries, out of the view of the public. With the issue now out in the open and in plain view Norris hoped that the Métis land issue could be forced to the political centre stage.

However, although the political organization of the Métis was not even three months old and despite the fact they already could see concrete results, both Norris and Brady were already concerned about losing political momentum, and with good reason. By 1933 the UFA government was beginning to unravel. The Depression, combined with a lingering drought was causing panic among the party’s main supporters, Alberta farmers. Brownlee could see the political danger inherent in offering help to the Métis while the livelihood of his major constituents was literally blown away. Out of the public eye, the province had made continuous enquiries as to the possibility of federal aid over the Métis land issue. The UFA government believed that the plight of the Métis was largely the fault of the federal government and equally believed that the Métis land issue could become a never-ending economic drain on the public purse.  

For his part, Joseph Dion unwittingly offered his support to the province, having expressed his belief that many of the Métis in direst need were in fact treaty Indians who had been enticed to trade their treaty rights for scrip, joining their Métis brothers in destitution. This lent credence to the Alberta government’s arguments that Indians who should have been allowed status had instead been dumped on the province by the federal government. Brownlee dispatched his

97 Ibid., 42.
98 Ibid., 47.
personal envoy to Ottawa to formally request the participation of the federal government in any future discussions of Métis land claims. Brownlee was rebuffed in clear and unequivocal language. A memo from the federal government advised the province that “all half-breeds are citizens and do not come under the Department of Indian Affairs or any other Federal Department.”

Watching from the sidelines, the executive of the M.A.A. saw the initial promise of political action on the part of the provincial government give way to trepidation. James Brady, apprised of the events unfolding in Edmonton and Ottawa, had no illusions as to the ultimate motives of the provincial government. In a letter to Joe Dion, Brady laid out his fears:

> It is also evident that the present government with the imminent approach of a general election will attempt to use our question as a vote catcher among our more credulous brethren. I have already heard through an impartial source that the government had already made moves in that direction....

Despite the rebuff from Ottawa, the provincial government decided it would not be politically wise to bury the Métis land issue. For the better part of eight months, civil servants in the Department of Mines pored over the hundreds of land questionnaires distributed by the M.A.A. The grim evidence of Métis destitution presented in the questionnaires was confirmed when civil servants visited the affected Métis communities and interviewed Association members. Deputy Minister Harvie was blunt in his assessment of the situation, reporting that “the future of the half-breed in the province is one that must be viewed with grave concern if anything

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100 James Brady to Joseph Dion, April 14, 1934. Brady Papers, Glenbow Institute, Calgary.
worthwhile is to be accomplished at even this late date.\footnote{101} He added, in a manner that would become commonplace, that the plight of the Métis could not be laid at the feet of the provincial government but rather had to be seen in light of the improvidence that the Métis collectively pursued, particularly in regards their "misuse" of scrip.\footnote{102} In a letter to the Premier, Harvie noted that,

> the history of the half-breed in Canada since the extinguishment of the Indian title shows that any scheme cannot be looked upon as being successful and it is highly problematical if any scheme will ever meet with complete success.\footnote{103}

Nevertheless, Harvie recommended the land issue be pursued, effectively endorsing a course of action which already had all the earmarks of failure.\footnote{104}

The acting Premier, R.G. Reid, concurred and gave the order to pursue the Métis land issue further. In retrospect, it may seem that endorsing a scheme that had no chance of success would be a politically foolhardy course of action. But Reid was gambling that an investigation, such as a Royal Commission, would give the beleaguered UFA government a chance to not only pass over responsibility to an independent body without further alienating its constituents, but also allow the government the option of accepting or rejecting any of the findings. That decision would of course be based on the outcome of the next provincial election. Reid would had no idea that his party was about to destroyed in that election.\footnote{105}

\footnote{101} Provincial Archives of Alberta, J. Harvie to R.G. Reid, June 24, 1933. Edmonton.  
\footnote{103} Provincial Archives of Alberta, J. Harvie to R.G. Reid, June 24, 1933. Edmonton.  
\footnote{105} \textit{Ibid.}, 46.
By the summer of 1934, the Métis Association was showing its strength. Its convention attracted over a thousand participants, including prominent politicians and journalists. The M.A.A. and its supporters knew it was too large to ignore. The government of the day would either have to show its political hand or face an uncertain political future. Its future became even more uncertain as details of an unsavoury sex scandal involving Premier Brownlee became well known. Brownlee’s successor, R. G. Reid knew that if his government were going to survive it had to act decisively on one of the few issues it could still control. In the same month as the M.A.A. convention, Premier Reid gave his approval of the appointment of a Royal Commission to investigate the Métis situation. Hill has painted this as the last desperate act of a dying administration.\(^\text{106}\)

Beyond the politics however, Murray Dobbin has suggested that the appointment of a Royal Commission was more invidious than mere politicking; it was an admission that government policy in dealing with the Métis for the past three decades had been a failure. Successive Alberta governments, in step with their constituents, and indeed, the rest of Canada, had assumed that the Métis, as other “outsiders” would be assimilated into the general fabric of the larger society. The question that had to be answered was, why not? A Royal Commission would provide the answer.\(^\text{107}\)

Beyond simple paternalism, Ken Hatt asserts that the underlying racist suppositions of the day allowed the creation of a discourse which would turn the quasi judicial public forum of the Commission into a type of inquisition. He has argued that the purpose of the Commission was to pathologize the Métis, determining the cause of their social illness and recommending a cure, but a cure...

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 46.

\(^{107}\) Murray Dobbin, One-And-A-Half Men, 87.
only if, under close scrutiny, it could be shown that the Métis were worthy to be redeemed and assimilated into white society. Whatever the Commission’s findings the government would have a free hand to test the political wind in any moment and make a decision either in favour or against proceeding to the land issue. The transcripts of the Royal Commission bear out Hatt’s allegations.108

An Order-In-Council of December 12, 1934, appointed a three man Royal Commission to

make inquiry into the condition of the half-breed population of the province of Alberta, keeping particularly in mind the health, education, relief and general welfare of such population.109

Officially titled the Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Investigate the Conditions of the Half-Breed Population in Alberta, the report became better known as the Ewing Commission after Chief Commissioner, A.F. Ewing. The Commission’s findings would determine the fate of the Alberta Métis for decades to come.

Knowing the close scrutiny the Commission would undergo, the provincial government appointed individuals whose actions would have the appearance being politically neutral and personally unimpeachable. To that end the provincial cabinet appointed as Commissioners A.F. Ewing, Doctor E.A. Braithwaite and J.M Douglas. The chairman, Albert F. Ewing was a presiding Albert Supreme Court Justice with a long history of public service. James M. Douglas had been an Alberta politician who had served as a magistrate in the Northwest Territories. Through his work he was well known in the Métis community and was considered to be an

expert on the land issue. Dr. Edward A. Braithwaite was a politically active physician who had played a prominent role in the creation of the provincial health department. Braithwaite had been particularly sympathetic to the Métis community, helping to organize the first systematic study of endemic disease among them. Commenting on their appointments, the *Edmonton Journal* reported that Métis problem “is certainly to be viewed by them sympathetically.”

Regardless of their personal views, the Commission would be guided in its lines of enquiries, conclusions, and recommendations not only by the wishes of the provincial government but also by prevailing social and political attitudes that permeated Canadian society in the 1930s. In the case of the Métis, the issue of race shaped these attitudes, not only in Alberta, but Canada and for the most part, the rest of the western world. Racism masquerading as science, most often in the form of social Darwinism, so pervaded Canadian society that the most outrageous conflation of racism, culture, and class were regarded, even among well educated people, as fact. One of the core racist beliefs centred on the notion that a natural human hierarchy existed, placing white Anglo-Saxons at the zenith of a civilized continuum and, not surprisingly, placed aboriginal people at its nadir. It was also commonly accepted that every distinct ethnic group possessed clearly defined characteristics and behaviours that were inherent to its members. The worth of cultures was determined on how similar, or rather, dissimilar they were to that of the Anglo-Saxon.

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113 Ibid., 54.
It was argued that cultural characteristics were not only inherent but transferable. Behaviours therefore, could act like contagions, infecting not only individuals in their own cultures but infect others who came into contact with them. Métis were especially regarded with fear and loathing, since it was assumed that as biracial people, they would have inherited the very worst “infections” of both parents. Such individuals were, therefore, in need of containment and close discipline, lest their contagion spread and infect “civilized” society.\textsuperscript{114}

It would be the duty of those whom nature had placed as the “natural masters” of society to eradicate the unprogressive and potentially infecting aspects of Métis society. That the Commissioners believed this was their duty is unmistakeable in an examination of the text of the Commission itself. Descriptions of the Métis as irresponsible, lazy, unintelligent, childlike, violent and prone to moral weakness are so frequent in the text that it cannot be doubted that however noble the intentions of the Commissioners, their actions were directed by the most pernicious forms of racism.\textsuperscript{115}

According to Ken Hatt, the racist discourse of the time dictated that the only recourse to the “problem” of the Métis was to continually formulate means and strategies, the rationale being that as in the case of any disease, many responses were needed in the hopes that a “magic bullet” would emerge. Assimilation as it had been practiced had failed, but this was not to suggest that assimilation was the wrong cure, only that the particular method of administration of the prescription had failed. New techniques and new dosages still promised a cure. Through the gathering of facts and a review of the “symptoms” of the Métis the Commissioners

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 55.
were expected to suggest a new form of treatment. In this manner, failure of the program of assimilation could be demonstrated not to be with those who had carefully tended the Métis, but the Métis themselves.\textsuperscript{116}

That this was the plan of the Commissioners from the beginning is clear. Commissioner Ewing said in his opening remarks that:

> In approaching the matter, the first thing that any responsible government should know, would be the number of people approximately they would be asked to care for. Then they would want to know the manner in which they should care for them. Assuming for the moment that we have established a number of people on the land, there are a number of them, a considerable percentage of them, destitute and diseased without means of improving their conditions. The next question would be what the best method of improving their position is, how do you proposed to do it and what will be the cost of it?\textsuperscript{117}

The Commissioners had identified to their own satisfaction both the problem of the benighted Métis and the solution. The only matters to be considered would be the method and the cost of the cure.

While the questionnaires had provided a wealth of information on the condition of the Métis, the Commission members felt it necessary to travel to a number of Métis communities to witness for themselves the conditions that they were being asked to act upon. Yet, while there, there is no record of the Commissioners actually questioning the Métis residents about their circumstances. Wherever the hearings were held, the Commissioners only accepted testimony from spokesman for the Métis Association, politicians, clergymen and physicians. The

\textsuperscript{116} Ken Hatt, Ethnic Discourse in Alberta: Land and the Metis in the Ewing Commission, 70.
Commissioners decided at some point from whom they would accept testimony and it under what conditions.\textsuperscript{118}

The limits on testimony imposed by the Commissioners caught the representatives of the Métis Association off guard but not unawares. From the beginning, Brady and Norris had assumed that the provincial government was earnest in its intent to grant land to the Métis, but at the same time they feared that the program would be shaped in reference to providing relief at the cheapest cost.\textsuperscript{119} Even before the Commission began sitting, Brady was concerned that the Métis would be painted as hopeless indigents, irresponsible, and incapable of governing themselves. Carefully examining the Commission venue, Brady and Norris directed their members not to challenge the Commissioners when they visited the Métis communities. Rather Brady and Norris decided that the Association would bide its time. They would wait until the Commission began deliberations in Edmonton, where under the scrutiny of the press and public, the Association leadership would make their case. In the months leading up to those hearings, Brady would undertake a meticulous analysis of Métis history. He hoped that he would be able to use his findings to demonstrate the historical unity of the Métis, their mistreatment at the hands of the Canadian government, and their determination to control their own destinies.\textsuperscript{120} Brady and Norris expected that they would be able to demonstrate not only the historical rights of the Métis, but the authority of the Métis Association of Alberta. In turn, they believed the Ewing Commission would be duty bound to

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{119} Murray Dobbin, \textit{One-And-A-Half Men}, 89.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 89.
recognize both their legal and moral authority as the rightful leaders of the Métis in Alberta. The wishes of the Métis Association, not the government of Alberta, would determine the destiny of the Métis.

They could not have been more wrong. The Commission hearings began in Edmonton, in February 1935, and the Commissioners had been already provided with biographical information on Brady and Norris, that painted them as dangerous political radicals. It is doubtful that the Commissioners ever intended in allowing the Commission to become a political platform for the likes of Brady and Norris. 121

Given his political acumen, Brady could not have been unaware that he was walking into a conservative lion’s den, yet he did not hesitate in laying out the Métis case. But from the beginning, whenever Brady or Norris made any attempt to suggest any wrong doing, Ewing stopped them cold, stating emphatically:

I do not see much good in raking up any mistakes that were made...years ago. If you want to go into the history of the whole situation...that is one matter; to say their condition is such that at the moment the state must act upon those conditions is another matter. 122

Dobbin has argued that Ewing distrusted the motives of the Association and believed they were motivated by political rather than humanitarian concerns. It is certain that Ewing intended from the beginning to direct the inquiry, and to ensure that the Association would be not be given the opportunity to challenge that inquiry. Not only did Ewing interrupt the Association speakers time and again, he went out of his way to verbally harass them. Ewing questioned Norris over the exact numbers of Métis that the Association represented and whether any Métis were opposed to

122 Ibid., 96.
them. Again Dobbin makes it clear that it was only members of the Association who were treated in this manner.¹²³

In fact from the first day of testimony, Ewing seemed to go out of his way to badger Norris, demanding points of clarification on trivial matters and then cutting off Norris’ answers. Norris was so shaken by his treatment that he advised the Commissioners on the second day that the Métis would submit their statements in writing. For the rest of the inquiry the Association members would limit their responses, only infrequently questioning other witnesses and asking for clarification on points of fact.¹²⁴

Norris and Brady were forced to rapidly rethink their strategy. In light of the hostility they encountered, they believed the land issue would be reduced to the approval for a reserve system similar to that of treaty Indians or worst the discredited St. Paul des Métis colony. In either case, the Association would be pushed aside, along with the national aspirations of the Métis.

In historical retrospect these fears seem logical. As a jurist, Ewing would have been cognizant of the fact that any acknowledgement of the political rights of the Métis could call into question the legality of the Alberta government’s actions, especially as it related to the provision of land. Although the federal government had denied legal responsibility for the Métis, it could still logically intervene in any decision arising out of the Commission’s findings, since it might be argued that the government of Alberta would be trying to create an entity that was in all but name

¹²³ Ibid., 98.
¹²⁴ Ibid., 98.
an aboriginal reserve. In such a case, any plans that the province would make for a cheap solution to provide for the assimilation of the Métis could fall by the wayside.

The Métis leaders were politically sophisticated enough to understand what was happening, but they were now facing an even greater dilemma. Denied the right to place the causes of Métis destitution in historical perspective, they would have to follow the lead of the Commissioners and be forced to acknowledge only the desperate condition of the Métis. The danger lay in the fact that by agreeing with the Commissioners, the Métis leadership was tacitly supporting the notion that the Métis were incapable of governing themselves. 125

In a desperate gamble, Norris and Brady attempted to draw a distinction between the Métis leadership and the Métis membership. They were to portray themselves as successful because they were assimilated and therefore had the right and the duty to lead their followers into assimilation. This was to have disastrous consequences, as they would be drawn into the project of pathologizing the very people they claimed to represent.

While Commissioner Ewing refused to allow the Métis Association members to make reference to the history of the Métis, he did not deny that right to others. In investigating the poverty of the Métis, Ewing allowed into the record submissions made by members of the Catholic clergy that the Métis were the “children of the fur trade” and possessed a “natural” preference for a nomadic life, a propensity to live from day to day, and a limited ability to care from themselves. 126 Another

submission stated that “the admitted fact that the half-breed is constitutionally unable to compete with the white man in the race of modern life.”127 Such statements were allowed as factual evidence without challenge or rebuttal from members of the M.A.A.

From the beginning, the Commissioners devoted much inquiry and evidence towards a definition of “Métis.” It seems that the members of the Commission wished to leave no doubt as to the sort of persons who would be under scrutiny, nor any doubts as to the reasons for any steps that would be necessary to deal with the “Métis Problem.” Given this reasoning it is peculiar to note that the Commissioners stated that they were not concerned with arriving at a legally correct definition of the Métis.128

Watching from the sidelines, Malcolm Norris believed that this concern over clarifying the identity of the destitute Métis was a clear attempt to divide the destitute Métis from their leadership. Compelled to act, Norris rose to address the Commissioners, fully conscious that he was being led into a trap. Nonetheless he made a brave attempt to again relocate the cause of Métis misery where it rightly belonged, with the white governing class. In measured tones he agreed, that while it was necessary to have aboriginal ancestry to be identified as a Métis, neither this fact nor the ability of someone to trace their forebears to the Red River were, on their own, enough to make someone Métis. Someone became a Métis because they were forced to live on the fringes of white society that had no place for them. If they were forced to hunt and trap and fish for a living, a poor living, then they were a Métis. Poverty condemned some to a life of destitution, ignorance, and disease only

127 Ibid., 16.
128 Ibid., 17.
because they were Métis. There could be no escaping this cycle of poverty because the cause of the suffering as a Métis was also the consequence.\textsuperscript{129} Ewing, having already made up his mind that both Norris and Brady were troublemakers, would have none of it. He would see to it that they not be allowed to bring up potentially embarrassing evidence, lest the direction of the Commission could be derailed.\textsuperscript{130}

Unmoved, the Commissioners proceeded to define who a Métis was, and more importantly, was not.\textsuperscript{131} The definition that was laid down would be that a Métis was a person of mixed blood who “lived the life of an ordinary half-breed.”\textsuperscript{132} Living the life of a half breed meant, to the Commissioners, to be a poor, diseased, and ill-educated aboriginal living on the fringe of society. Those would be offered aid and tutelage, but those who did not fit this stereotype would not be adjudged to be a Métis and, therefore, not counted in the government relief efforts.\textsuperscript{133}

This vision of the Métis not only pathologized the Métis but moved the proceedings, not in the direction of a discussion of legal or contractual rights as the M.A.A. leadership had hoped, but as a forum to forge a causal link between the failures of those Métis and their circumstances. Their redemption at the hands of the Alberta government would then be judged as arising from a moral rather than a legal right. “Considerations of humanity and justice” meant that the government was free to offer as much or as little succour as it deemed fit.\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{129} Murray Dobbin, \textit{One-And-A-Half Men}, 95.
\textsuperscript{130} \textit{Ibid.}, 96.
\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Ibid.}, 95.
\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Ibid.}, 95.
\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Ibid.}, 95.
\textsuperscript{134} \textit{Ibid.}, 95.
The Commission transcripts reveal how Ewing sought to manoeuvre the Association into accepting this definition. In one exchange, Ewing asked Malcolm Norris directly if he would agree that anyone having Indian blood in their veins and living the normal life of a half breed came with the definition of "half-breed." Norris, no doubt aware of the corner he was being painted into nonetheless had to agree. Ewing replied, "You see, you must include living the life of a half breed, there are a large number of men in Edmonton occupying responsible positions who are not intended to be included in this investigation." In Ewing's eyes, men such as Brady and Norris, successful by the standards of white society were not to be considered Métis at all and had no business in the proceedings, because they were not Métis.

The Commissioners wished to draw a picture of people who were not merely destitute but whose destitution was the result of their own failings. Their failings were bound up, not in the white society in which the Métis found themselves, but rather in the fact that they belonged to a failed race. The failings of the Métis were inherent. Such lack of discipline precluded them or indeed, their spokesmen, from being capable of providing governance. The purpose of governance was not merely containment but the proper assimilation of the Métis. Successful governance alone could guarantee successful assimilation.

These continued moral assaults by the Commissioners soon took their toll on the M.A.A. leadership. In one exchange, the Commissioners asked Norris if the Métis were "hopeless indigents." Knowing that any attempt at discussing the larger

issue of Métis poverty would be met with a tirade, Norris was forced to answer simply “yes.” Likewise, when Commissioner Douglas pointedly suggested that the Métis would be better off as wards of the government, Brady agreed.\textsuperscript{138}

Adopting a different strategy, both Norris and Brady attempted to verbally distance themselves from those they represented by referring to the Métis they represented as “they” or “them” while referring to the leadership as “we” or “us.” Ewing would have none of it. Having demonized poor Métis, he and his fellows pressed the attack to discredit the M.A.A. leadership entirely.\textsuperscript{139}

Whether Brady and Norris believed that they could still salvage something of value from the hearings, it was of no consequence to the final proceedings. Having already tacitly agreed on both the problem and the solution, the Commissioners used the bulk of the proceedings to provide the necessary evidence to justify their course of action.

Thus, in his examination of the Ewing Commission proceedings, Ken Hatt has shown that each set of hearings consisted of three components; in the first instance a statement or reiteration of the Métis problem relating to their current conditions, a description of a remedy for those conditions and a set of concluding statements which were to offer a rationale or remedy for both.\textsuperscript{140}

This was evident in the hearings which dealt with education, health and farming. During each of the proceedings, Ewing and his companions would call upon expert witnesses, invariably priests, physicians, and politicians, to fill in the necessary details.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 99.
Realizing the magnitude of the problem, the Commissioners were also aware of the amount of relief that would be available. This fact led to strange verbal acrobatics on the part of the Commissioners. Take for example an exchange between Ewing and Father Coudert, where Ewing asked for education details about the Métis and asked Coudert if it was a fact that 80% of adult Métis were illiterate. Father Coudert replied that it was so, but here the testimony ends. Neither Ewing nor any of the other Commissioners press the matter, since it might have led to questions about the responsibility of the Alberta government in failing to provide access to schools for the Métis. The transcripts of the Commission show that the Commissioners would not allow testimony which might call the motives of the provincial government into question. 141

Evidence another exchange between Commissioner Douglas and Bishop Breynat on the issue of Métis education:

Mr. Douglas: "What is your opinion regarding the value of giving the half-breed an education?"

The Bishop: "I don’t think he would be given too much education. Too much is bad for some of them. He needs a little help—I think just until they are 13 or 14 probably."

Judge Ewing: I agree with you."142

Clearly, offering education to the Métis when it might be wasted, or worse, used to improve the condition of the Métis, was a bad thing, since that education might be used by the Métis to challenge the racist state. The Commissioners did concede that it was scandalous that a civilized country like Canada, had so many

141 Provincial Archives of Alberta, Report of the Royal Commission appointed to Investigate the Conditions of the Half-Breds of Alberta. 1936, 485
142 Ibid., 538
illiterates. Judge Ewing did agree some practical education might be useful but necessarily limited in scope, beyond suggesting that schools be built on any colony approved. Judith Hill has suggested that Catholic clergy who testified readily accepted the assessments of the Commissioners not only because they accepted the inferiority of the Métis but also because they hoped to be granted the right to provide schooling on the new colonies.¹⁴³

The testimony pathologizing the Métis was never so naked as in the discussion of the health of the Métis. The testimony given seemed to be aimed at not only showing the diseased conditions of the Métis, but to place the blame for the problems on the shoulders of the Métis. The physicians called to testify appear to have been given free rein in the testimony regarding the health of the Métis. While the Commissioners asked for clarification on several medical issues, they never questioned the veracity of the speakers except in cases where the seriousness of a particular set of circumstances was, in the opinion of the Commissioners being downplayed. It would seem that the Commissioners wished to show that the Métis indeed were diseased but at the same time show it was the Métis’ fault rather than that of the government for not providing enough medical services. This was clear in exchanges between several of the physicians who testified. Dr. Quesnel, the resident physician at the Métis settlement of Lac la Biche for three decades, presented a brief on the conditions there.

Their (Métis) appalling ignorance makes them unfit to understand the first item of our law of hygiene and sanitation. This same ignorance which has persisted among them for centuries, has made them indolent and given them a subnormal mentality, all of these deficiencies are conducive to laziness, laziness predisposes to poverty and poverty in an ignorant, indolent race means filth and filth brings

disease...they mostly lie in rags and many of them do not know the meaning of the word bath...these deficiencies plus the contact of both sexes leads to immorality and thence to venereal diseases. 144

His words were entered into the record without comment or rebuttal.

Dr. E.L McIntyre from High Prairie reported that the high rates of venereal diseases and tuberculosis in Métis communities were traceable to the lack of consistent health care in the north and were responsible for sapping the physical and moral strength of the Métis, a condition which, in his opinion, presented “an almost fatalistic vision of their current state.” 145 While on one level McIntyre seemed to agree with the direction of the hearings, it would appear that the Commissioners were uncomfortable with McIntyre as a witness. McIntyre was known to be friends with members of the M.A.A. leadership and Hatt has argued that the Commissioners may have been concerned that McIntyre’s testimony in someway might aid the M.A.A. side. That may offer an explanation as to why the exchange between McIntyre and another physician Harold Orr seems to have been directed as merely a differing opinion of diagnosis between to physicians and therefore acceptable to the proceedings.

Dr. Harold Orr, a physician attached to the Alberta Department of Health was called on for a rebuttal of McIntyre’s testimony by Commissioner Ewing. Orr argued that in fact venereal disease among the Alberta Métis was no higher than among whites in England and America. It is understandable that as an employee of the government Orr would want to downplay the health of the Métis. But the timing of his rebuttal also points to something more sinister in the Royal Commission

proceedings. Previously Orr had blocked a recommendation for the appointment of a physician at the Métis settlement of Grouard. Writing to the Deputy Minister of Health, he warned that the “cost would be prohibitive unless the Venereal Disease Vote was very greatly increased.”

When suggestions were called for to deal with the ill-health of the Métis, Dr. Quesnel gave a fatalistic appraisal of the possibilities:

If a child is born to parents suffering of diseases, he is badly handicapped for the rest of his life; if he is born of healthy parents, he is brought up in early years on a concoction of milk, water and grease and later on bannock. If he manages to pull through this ordeal, his filthy surroundings expose him to innumerable infections. How many babies have I seen sucking at the breast of a tubercular mother!...How many babies have I seen covered with ulcers and sores! Poor little lousy devils what are your prospects in life. An endless living hell, that is all. It is true that every day your parents will give you medicine that I prescribe, but my advice on hygiene and sanitation will be forgotten at my office door, therefore, your medicine might as well be thrown into the lake.

In giving other testimony, Quesnel routinely referred to the Métis as “dirty,” “mentally sub-normal” and “lazy.” It was not lack of medicine that was responsible for the Métis health, but the Métis degenerate lifestyle. The message to the Commissioners, and certainly the one they wished to hear, was that the Métis were too irresponsible to be left to their own devices and their betterment would only take place under strict white control. It would be an irony that Quesnel would later be appointed as a medical director of the newly formed Métis colonies.

Again, the historical evidence points to the fact that the Commissioners accepted all testimony that confirmed their own racist opinions of the Métis. The

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146 Ibid., 67.
147 Ibid., 68.
148 Ibid., 68.
priests, politicians, and physicians were never asked to provide proof of their statements, nor is there any evidence that the Commissioners concerned themselves with making more detailed enquiries. No details of individual cases were offered, no direction for missing facts or contested arguments were made. The fate of the Métis had been decided.\textsuperscript{149}

The questions and the answers merely unified what had been suspected regarding the health, education and general welfare of the Métis. Even the cure was known, the only thing left to the Commissioners was to decide the application of the remedy.

By the time the Commission began its discussion of the actual details of providing land for a farming colony, it was clear that the Commissioners would have long since pushed aside any consideration of the M.A.A. leadership or equally, any consideration of a role they might play on the colonies themselves. Yet, despite all of their setbacks and disappointments, the M.A.A. leadership still were determined to emerge victorious in their struggle for land. Even as the tide of disappointment rose in their ranks, Norris and Brady desperately clung to the hope that if that land were granted to the Métis, regardless of the circumstances, they could rely on gaining political control in the colonies themselves. Both men believed that their work would be rewarded by the continued support of their Métis constituents and that at the end of the day the M.A.A. leadership would emerge victorious. Driven perhaps by desperation, Norris and Brady decided that if the land issue needed to be reframed only as an agricultural relief scheme, then so be it.

It is one of the anomalies of the Ewing Commission that the issue of land provided both the impetus and the outcome for the hearings. It had certainly been

\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Ibid.}, 68.
decided at some earlier date that the purpose of any land grant would be to effect the transition of the Métis from a nomadic existence to an agricultural one. Yet even over this issue the Commissioners seemed determined to call into question the abilities of the Métis to accomplish this, as if presupposing their likely failure.

And, if any of the Commissioners suspected the motives of the M.A.A., they were unconcerned. When the Commission testimony moved to the issue of land, the Commissioners never attempted to redirect the inquiry in anticipation of some sort of coup by the M.A.A. Rather, the Commissioners hammered away at the perceived inadequacies of the Métis. When Ewing asked Joe Dion if he was satisfied that “those people” could give up their nomadic habits and become farmers, Dion advised the judge that he believed the Métis “had learned their lesson” and would settle down. Clearly unhappy with Dion’s unexpected response, Ewing turned his attention to Tomkins.

Do you think that they would settle down? Of course putting in a garden is not farming, and that is hardly what one would be thinking of in discussion of a land settlement scheme. Do you think that they would make a success of farming? 

Tomkins assured Ewing that the Métis could be successful, but admitted he expected “many” would still want to hunt as well. Tomkins, unlike Brady and Norris, did not view the land issue in the same abstract terms. He was concerned that if only agricultural land was offered, then the Métis who lived by hunting and trapping would have no option but to farm, something he believed many would fail

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152 Ibid., 666.
at. The M.A.A. restated their belief that any land for colonies should include "bush" to ensure the survival of these individuals.\footnote{153 Murray Dobbin, \textit{One-And-A-Half Men}, 102.}

For their part, the Commissioners were not interested in the Métis continuing their traditional ways of life. That life, in their estimation, was responsible for their fecklessness, their disease, their dissolute lifestyle, and most importantly their failure to assimilate.

Certainly this failure to assimilate coloured the testimony of both Frank Falkener, Liberal MLA for Athabasca and Donald McLeod, who represented Stony Plain for the UFA. Both ridings, with large settlements of Métis, were likely locations for the Métis colonies, and that possibility did not impress either man. Asked to comment on the success for such a land program, McLeod replied that as far as he was concerned the Métis were a lost cause. For his part, Falkener was of the opinion that:

\begin{quote}
The Métis generally speaking will not make a good farmer. It does not seem to appeal to his mode of living. I think that perhaps it requires a little bit too close applications; and because of his natural tendency to a roving life, he does not make a success of it. I am very doubtful of the ultimate success of any scheme or any attempt to induce the half breed to take up agriculture as a mode of livelihood, and I am rather doubtful it will ever be successful.\footnote{154 Provincial Archives of Alberta, \textit{Report of the Royal Commission}, 242-243.}
\end{quote}

The only white man to speak positively of the plan was the Roman Catholic Bishop Guy of Grouard, who offered his support for agricultural colonies. He presented the Commission with a detailed analysis of the land problem as well as suggestions for the makeup of the colonies. Sympathetic to both Dion and Tomkins, he suggested a mix of land be made available for both hunting and farming and
stressed the need for schools and medical facilities. The Bishop however, was also guarded in his optimism. Given the proven wastrel nature of the Méts, he surmised that it would be in the best interest of all that any land made available should remain perpetually with the Crown. He also stated the government should appoint a government agent and clergyman to direct the activities of the Méts, He advised that only with such control could the Méts be expected to become fully assimilated and productive members of society and not become permanent wards of the state.

The testimony over the land issue made it clear to everyone that there could be no expectation of political autonomy. Land for the Méts would entail the creation of a public welfare bureaucracy and the appointing of overseers to perpetually guide its wards. Land would be the pest house to control the pathogens of the Méts, not be a vehicle for self determination. As agents of the government, the three Commissioners had seen to it that the wishes of the government would be followed to the letter. There would be no place for the Méts leadership without the province’s approval.

In February, 1936, the final report of the Ewing Commission was issued. It was almost three years after the resolution to investigate the Méts land question was voted into life on the floor of the Alberta Legislature. The report consisted of just fourteen pages divided into three parts, consisting of a general discussion of the circumstances of the Méts, the Commission’s assessment of the causes of the “Méts Problem,” and recommendations for corrective action. The Méts were portrayed as primitive victims in the path of civilization, a civilization which they did not fully

156 Ibid., 62.
157 Ibid., 76.
comprehend nor had the ability to cope with. That situation, combined with a natural fecklessness and poor foresight was responsible for their current circumstances. The report concluded that the situation of the Métis was an “unfortunate state of affairs.”

Despite their circumstances, the Métis, in the opinion of the Commission, had no inherent rights or special claims to aid. To grant special status to the Métis at such a late date would only “make the Métis dependent upon the government for support. It would undermine his initiative, destroy his sense of responsibility, and prevent his ever become a self-supporting citizen.” To that end it would be recommended that the government of Alberta make land available to the Métis. That recommendation would be made in “consideration of humanity and justice.”

To save the Métis, the Commission recommended that the state would have to teach the Métis the discipline they lacked. The report intoned:

The logic of the situation would seem that he (the Métis) must either change his mode of life to conform to that of the white inhabitants or he must gradually disappear. As far as the Commission was concerned the Métis must become farmers, that is assimilate or vanish from history.

This task would not be easy for either party and the Commission’s final report cautioned that:

A long process of education and training is necessary. A gradual initiation into the new life is the only possible way. It is during this long period of transition rendered by the white man that he has a

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158 Ibid., 76.
159 Ibid., 78.
160 Ibid., 78.
161 Ibid., 78.
right to look to the white man and the white man's organized system of government for help, for guidance, and for encouragement.\textsuperscript{162}

The assimilationist objective stated in the recommendations was that some form of farm colony would be the most effective, and ultimately, the cheapest method of dealing with the problem. Isolated from the dangers of the outside world and under the guidance of white supervisors who would have policing powers, the Métis would be guided towards their future. The colonies would become a moral proving ground for the Métis. Given the fact that the government considered the Métis a child-like people, this process, it was agreed, might last for decades. Only under the careful and constant scrutiny of state appointed overseers, could the Métis' mistakes be corrected and their advancement towards an independent, and therefore assimilated state could be completed. It was also clear that whenever that day would come, it would only come under the leadership of outsiders rather than the Métis themselves.

From the sidelines, the leadership of the M.A.A. stood by, dumbstruck in their Pyrrhic victory. On the one hand the promise of land to the destitute Métis of Alberta was assured and on the other, so too was the end of Métis political aspirations. The Métis leadership neither challenged the recommendations nor advised their constituents to prepare for further action. The historical minute, it would seem, had passed.

The nagging historical question that still hangs over the Métis land issue seven decades on is why didn't the Métis leadership respond and challenge the conclusions of the Ewing Commission? The conclusions of the Commission would be adopted in their entirety under the auspices of the Métis Population Betterment Act

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 78.
of 1938. Why didn’t they press their membership to force the government to recognize the governing role of the M.A.A.? Sawchuk\textsuperscript{163} and Dobbin\textsuperscript{164} both argue that the power of the state was just too powerful to resist. Alberta had undergone profound political changes in the period from 1930 to 1936. Whatever little political currency the M.A.A. may have possessed in the early years of the decade, it had been swept away in the aftermath of the provincial election of 1935. The landslide victory of the Social Credit Party prior to the issuance of the Ewing Commission’s final recommendations meant that the new government had no need to placate the Métis.\textsuperscript{165} Sleek in victory, it had no need of the political deal-making of its frail UFA predecessors. Whether the land scheme would succeed or fail was of no consequence. Blame could be equally apportioned to the politicians who had made the deal or to the Métis should they squander this boon. Whatever their reasoning, the new Premier, “Bible Bill” Aberhart, would ignore any attempts of the M.A.A. leadership to reassert its rights.

Brady and Norris, confronted with the failure of the project that had occupied them so closely for four long years, and perhaps exhausted by that struggle, chose to abandon the political field and their brethren in Alberta to continue their struggles elsewhere. Dobbin argues that:

To reassert their demand for political autonomy and association authority would require a major sustained political fight which promised little hope of success.\textsuperscript{166}


\textsuperscript{164} Murray Dobbin, \textit{One-And-A-Half Men}, 104.

\textsuperscript{165} \textit{Ibid.}, 104.

\textsuperscript{166} \textit{Ibid.}, 107.
Support for this conclusion comes in a letter from Peter Tomkins to Joe Dion in May, 1936, where he stated bluntly:

Malcolm and Brady has [sic] thrown up the sponge. I fear we will have to get a few more new Executives. If the rest of the province doesn’t wake up soon I will be forced to lie down too. I’m not a quitter but I like a little support and co-operation from other places once and a while...I don’t like the tone of Malcolm’s letter where he says “You have sympathy in your struggle for the Métis.”

While it is true both Brady and Norris would reappear on the scene and make half hearted efforts to be recognized in some capacity once the colonies were established, it would be too little, too late. Only when it was clear that Métis were a spent political force, would Premier Aberhart attempt any reconciliation with the Métis community. He would offer paid advisory positions to Tomkins and Dion to help manage the colonies. This act was not in recognition of their efforts, but merely to demonstrably reward the two “good Indians” who, in the eyes of the triumphant Alberta politicians had behaved with proper deference expected of a defeated and needy people. Defeated, the Métis of Alberta would take their dream of nationhood with them as they fell into a political slumber that would last for decades.

In retrospect, the outcome of the Ewing Commission was a bitter and Pyrrhic victory for the Métis. While the issue of land that had brought the Métis Association of Alberta into existence had been resolved in favour of the Métis, it was the government of Alberta that was the true victor, and in retrospect that victory had never intended. the Métis and their leadership believed that by gaining access and control of the land they occupied, they could take control of their

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167 Ibid., 107.
168 Ibid., 122.
economic and political lives. Control would give them independence and the
opportunity to map out a future for their people. Equally naïve was the assumption
of the Métis that the government would aid them in their quest.

The simple fact that the Métis leadership had overlooked was that their
organization posed a serious challenge to the government of Alberta. In order meet
the challenge presented by the Métis, the government of Alberta rewrote the
demands of the Métis in terms of race as much as politics. This intersection of race
and politics were critical in understanding the response of the Alberta government
to the Métis Association of Alberta. These responses, filtered through the
proceedings of the Ewing Commission, presupposed the demands of the Métis for
land and devised strategies to effectively co-opt their movement and cure once and
for all. The fact of concerted and organized political action by the Métis, the government sought to use land as a weapon to pacify the Métis, dismantle
their leadership, and ultimately assimilate the Métis into white society. As we have
seen, The Ewing Commission would provide the stage on which the struggle
between the government of Alberta and the Métis Association of Alberta would be
waged. The circumstances under which the Ewing Commission was created operated
and concluded, speaks to the racism and paternalism that has historically shaped
relations between the state and Aboriginal people in Canada. Of course, racism on
its own cannot capture the complexity of the power relationship that underpinned
those hearings. The racism exhibited by the Commissioners was only the most
visible tool in an arsenal of power employed by the state in dealing with the
demands of the Métis for land.
Racism in the hands of the state served to shape the construction of the proceedings with reference to a pre-existing historical narrative defining the identities, purposes, issues and outcomes of those proceedings. The purpose of those outcomes had little to do with land and destitution and more to do with the perpetuation of white dominance and aboriginal subservience.

The purpose of the Ewing Commission, then, was to provide an opportunity to invoke a form of coercive tutelage on the Métis. By demonstrating to the world that the indigence of the Métis was self-inflicted, the logical outcome of their primitiveness, their nomadic lifestyle and their inability to assimilate, any corrective remedies offered by the state would be seen as selfless, charitable, and benevolent acts to civilize and "uplift" the Métis.

The political realities of 1930s Alberta demanded that any charitable acts would be necessarily cheap. Land, cheap and abundant, answered the issue but created a new and more troubling question, how to ensure any recommendation to provide land for the Métis would not be seen as a response to a claim base on legal rights stemming from Métis aboriginality, claims that might serve to legitimize Métis self-determination? The answer is provided in the testimony of the Ewing Commission. Any recognition of Métis rights to land would be considered as a response stemming not from the Métis' aboriginality but from their state of destitution, overwritten with the racist suppositions of the time would also provide the means both to extinguish the political movement that had been the foundation of Métis land claims and instead, bring about the assimilation of the

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Métis. The fact that the province had interceded and provides land relief was proof that the Métis were ill prepared to handle their own affairs. The Ewing Commission made in clear in its conclusions that it would naturally fall to the government to provide the leadership necessary to govern the Métis, who had so clearly failed in that regard. Self determination, if it came at all, would be when the Métis, properly infused with the orderly values of white society, showed themselves worthy and capable.

The imposition of direct government control over the farm colonies so generously given to the indigent Métis would also mean the end of Métis political unity. Having accomplished the goal of "helping" the government "help" the Métis, the M.A.A. would have no further purpose. With the issue of land successfully dealt with, the Métis leadership were left with neither the moral power to challenge the authority of the state nor the necessary constituency to continue the struggle. The government had carefully calculated that by bypassing the M.A.A. leadership with the imposition of its own leadership on the colonies would ensure, the government would never again have to "play politics" with the Métis. The state saw to it that the land the Alberta Métis hoped to be a cradle for a new nation instead became its grave.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


