

# MÉTIS LIVES, PAST AND PRESENT

## *A Review Essay*

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*What It Is to Be a Métis: The Stories and Recollections  
of the Elders of the Prince George Métis Society*

Mike Evans, Marcelle Gareau, Lisa Krebs, Leona Neilson, and Heidi  
Standeven, editors

Prince George: UNBC Press, 1999. 265 pp. Illus. \$29.95 paper.

*I Knew Two Métis Women:  
The Lives of Dorothy Scofield and Georgina Houle Young*

Gregory Scofield

Victoria: Polestar, 1999. 139 pp. \$16.95 paper.

*Thunder through My Veins: Memories of a Métis Childhood*

Gregory Scofield

Toronto: Harper Flamingo, 1999. 202 pp. \$24 cloth.

THE LAST TWENTY YEARS have seen a marked resurgence of interest in the Métis. This revival is due in part to the recognition of the Métis as a distinct Aboriginal people within the Canadian Constitution as well as to the 1985 centenary of the Northwest Rebellion and the execution of the Métis leader Louis Riel. It has been estimated that as many as two million Canadians could legitimately claim Métis status. Not surprisingly, the social, economic, and political ramifications of these numbers have engendered lively debate over that most elusive of concepts, the Métis identity.

Certainly one of the most successful attempts to address the topic of Métis identity has been the 1985 anthology

*The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*. Not only does this book contain several groundbreaking theoretical essays on Métis ethnogenesis, but it also features comprehensive studies detailing the origins and development of a number of biracial communities in Canada and the United States. However, the book falls short in one key area. The articles, by and large, are third-person, scholarly interpretations of Métis history, culture, and identity. The perspectives of Métis people themselves regarding their experiences are largely absent.

Life histories of Métis people can be found in biographical dictionaries, in old-timers' reminiscences that have been gathered and published, and in scholarly and popular biographies.

Métis-authored works have appeared only in the last three decades. Because scholars of Native ancestry are few and far between in universities and colleges, much of the new writing by Métis is being produced outside of the academy. It is being published by institutions and media outlets administered by and for Aboriginal people or by small publishing houses devoted to politics and culture outside of the mainstream. Another characteristic of these publications is that they are overwhelmingly autobiographical in nature.

Biographical works in general, and autobiographical works in particular, have a somewhat chequered reputation among scholars, despite the fact that virtually all historians utilize biography to some degree in their research and teaching and the fact that the methodology used to generate life histories has become increasingly more sophisticated.

In its favour, autobiography has an important role to play in understanding the lived experiences of ethnocultural groups, both historical and contemporary. For those racial, religious, and cultural minorities estranged from the mainstream institutions responsible for shaping – and suppressing – cultural identity, autobiography offers freedom of expression without the editorial contamination of mainstream “experts.” At its best, autobiographical writing provides an insider’s perspective on identity that is intrinsically superior to the analyses of even the most sensitive observer. The best autobiographies offer a window into an area of ethnicity that is imperfectly understood – this being the existential, psychological dimensions of living as a person of a particular ethnic identity.

Autobiography has its shortcomings, however. For example, autobiography, by its very nature, is intrinsically biased. One can never assume that the entire life story is being provided, that the facts are entirely accurate, or that the chronicler is neutral in his or her assessment of past personalities or events. Autobiographies are also very particularistic. Making broad generalizations about ethnic identity based on one or two autobiographical assessments is a risky undertaking at best. At their worst, when produced by individuals with social, political, or economic agendas, autobiographies can devolve into thinly disguised propaganda pieces.

Which brings us to a consideration of three recent publications documenting the life experiences of BC Métis people. Without going into detail here, it should be noted that the unique history of Native policy in British Columbia has resulted in an indigenous population that, until recently, was largely bereft of treaty relationships with the Crown. Until the recent Nisga’a accord, the only treaties were those that James Douglas negotiated with Native bands living in the vicinity of Victoria, Nanaimo, and Fort Rupert between 1850 and 1854, and Treaty 8, which several remote Native communities in northeastern British Columbia chose to enter in 1899. The policy of the BC government, until recently, has been to ignore or deny the existence of Aboriginal title in the remainder of the province, hence the lack of further treaties. The result has been that “Indians” and Métis have shared the same “non-status” designation for most of the twentieth century. It is the migration to British Columbia of Métis people from Alberta, Saskatchewan, and elsewhere

that has introduced Aboriginal status distinctions into BC Native populations. The first volume to be considered here, *What It Is to Be a Métis: The Stories and Recollections of the Elders of the Prince George Métis Society*, is both a function and a result of these developments.

The Prince George Métis community, as characterized in this volume, is not an indigenous Métis community (i.e., a community that has evolved locally from generations of intermarriage between Europeans and the BC Native groups local to the area); rather, it is a reformulated community whose members migrated to British Columbia from Métis communities elsewhere in western Canada. It has been in the process of “becoming” since 1945 and is part and parcel of a larger out-migration of people from the Prairie provinces that took place after the Second World War. During this period, the mechanization of agriculture dispensed with the need for large numbers of seasonal agricultural workers, many of whom were First Nations and Métis. The forestry, fishing, and mining industries of British Columbia were attractive to people displaced in a western agricultural economy battered by the Depression.

Twenty of the Métis elders interviewed for this volume come from three areas: northwestern Saskatchewan, north-central Alberta, and north-eastern Alberta. The remaining three interviews are with former residents of The Pas, Manitoba. These elders and their descendants have been in the Prince George area for approximately three generations. Now that its most recent generation has reached adulthood, the community has chosen to commemorate its longevity by compiling

a volume of oral reminiscences. The anthology documents a variety of experiences that paint a vivid portrait of Métis life in the first half of the twentieth century.

To complete this undertaking, the Prince George Métis Elders Society collaborated with the Native Studies Department of the University of Northern British Columbia, which is based in Prince George. Under the supervision of staff members from the Department of Anthropology, students enrolled in the Native Studies Program compiled questions, interviewed elders, and transcribed and edited the completed interviews. In order to ensure that the project remained under the control of the Métis elders, ethical guidelines governing researchers’ conduct, the construction of research instruments, and the editing and disseminating of the completed work were developed by anthropology staff members in collaboration with the elders. The research methodology has been detailed in Appendix 1 of this book and provides a useful reference for those considering similar collaborative projects.

Unfortunately, projects of this nature can become unnecessarily political, and the work of the scholars involved in this compilation is no exception. Project coordinator Mike Evans states in boldface type: “We have purposefully avoided interpretations and analysis of the stories included, but rather have left the Elders’ stories to speak for themselves” (259). He then offers a further explanation:

The reasons for this are several, but the fundamental methodological point is that sometimes the best way to ensure that

Aboriginal community members are represented fairly is for researchers to stay silent, and let people speak for themselves. Euro-Canadian scholars have had a great deal to say about Métis history and culture, so we thought that we would let Métis themselves have a turn ... This is not to suggest that the scholarship of anthropologists is somehow bad, but simply that there needs to be a place in Métis Studies for Métis voices as well. (259)

It is a legitimate concern that the presence of scholarly content in a volume of this nature might somehow overshadow, or even undermine the importance of, oral testimony. But these issues can be competently resolved through sensitive editing and design. The oral accounts in this volume are intrinsically compelling, have been carefully edited, and will make a valuable addition to a growing collection of published oral accounts by Métis people dealing with social and economic life in the twentieth century. They are in no danger of being upstaged by scholarly additions.

Although a brief (one-and-a-half page) introductory essay has been included in the volume, the two paragraphs devoted to Métis history are far too general in scope to be of any real use to the reader. One of the responsibilities of an editor (particularly one working for a scholarly press) is to place oral accounts like these within a broader social, political, and economic context so that their content cannot be dismissed. The phrase "oral history" is one of the most abused terms in the scholarly lexicon. It is unfortunate that so many researchers assume that they are practising "oral

history" when they interview subjects and transcribe the narratives. In fact, this recorded material does not become "history" until it is placed within a broader historical context through annotation or analysis. This could easily have been accomplished in *What It Is to Be a Métis* through the preparation of a separate essay discussing Métis migration in general and the movement of Prairie Métis to British Columbia in particular. The intent of such an article would not be to "slight" or overshadow the value of the oral accounts but, rather, to provide context in order to enhance the interest and value of the oral accounts.

The inclusion of maps identifying the communities in the Prince George area and some of the Métis communities in northern Alberta and Saskatchewan would have been another welcome addition. The quality of the bibliography included at the end of the volume is also disappointing. If a "Selected Bibliography on Métis History and Culture" is to be included, then the compiler of such a list must be truly selective. There are hundreds of publications devoted to Métis history and culture. Although a few of the entries in this bibliography are indispensable to an understanding of the Métis, other books and articles are dated and/or have little relationship to the region under study or to the social and economic themes that emerge from the interviews.

Despite these shortcomings, the research team and UNBC Press should be commended for detailing the collaborative research methodology developed for this project as well as for their sensitive gathering and editing of the interviews. Readers who are interested in the formation, dissolution, and reformulation of Métis communities in

western Canada will welcome this compilation.

The recent resurgence in Métis consciousness has been even more pronounced among younger members in the community, who have often had to struggle against geographical dislocation and family dysfunction in order to reclaim their indigenous identities. Unlike the Métis elders of Prince George, who grew up with a strong sense of Métis cultural awareness, many younger Métis have found themselves in a cultural vacuum, where knowledge of their mixed heritage is either denied or denigrated by those around them. Their struggle to fully realize themselves as Métis is a predicament that has not always been viewed sympathetically by their First Nations cousins or by non-Natives in mainstream society. Fortunately, the Métis community has been blessed with several gifted storytellers who have used their talents to interpret the multifaceted dimensions of modern Métis identity to a wider audience.

Gregory Scofield, a poet, musician, and community activist, is one of the “new wave” of Métis writers to share his experiences in print. Raised in Maple Ridge, Scofield now lives and works in Vancouver. He has published several volumes of poetry; his first volume, *The Gathering: Stones for the Medicine Wheel* (1993), won the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize. His fourth volume of poetry, *I Know Two Métis Women: The Lives of Dorothy Scofield and Georgina Houle Young*, appeared in the same year as did his autobiography, *Thunder through My Veins: Memories of a Métis Childhood*. It is appropriate, and fortuitous, that these books were released at the same time, since Scofield’s autobiography provides the context needed to truly appreciate his

poetic tribute to the two most important women in his life – his mother Dorothy Scofield and his adopted aunt Georgina Houle Young.

*Thunder through My Veins* is a powerful and sometimes difficult read. If nothing else, it illuminates the importance of nurturing (or the lack thereof) in the development of a child’s concept of self. It also illustrates the crucial role that Métis women have played in sustaining Métis culture and identity in the midst of the mainstream world. The two Métis women at the centre of Scofield’s life, his mother Dorothy and his adopted aunt Georgina, are a study in contrasts. Dorothy Scofield loves her son but is often incapable of providing the care he needs as she struggles with the multiple demons of chronic illness, domestic abuse, and drug and alcohol addiction. As a result Gregory’s young life is filled with turmoil. Often abandoned to the care of others, and exposed to the threat of physical and sexual violence, Gregory Scofield is a lost soul, seemingly destined to become yet another social casualty.

Fortunately, however, Georgina Houle Young comes into Gregory’s life. When Gregory Scofield meets Georgina for the first time, in Maple Ridge, he is a confused and solitary little boy looking for a friend in the noisy apartment building where he and his mother live. “Georgie,” as her friends call her, is an elderly Métis woman from Wabasca, Alberta, who welcomes Gregory into her home and into her heart. She not only sees the loneliness in Gregory, but also the heritage that they both share – *Awp-pee-tow-koosan* (Métis). As their friendship grows, she becomes Gregory’s *Ne-ma-sis* (little mother; aunty), telling him stories, teaching him the Cree language and the use of medicinal

plants, and sharing with him the spiritual beliefs and worldview that have sustained her throughout her life.

Despite the oasis of security that Georgie provides, Gregory's life is far from easy. Caught up in day-to-day struggles to deal with an abusive stepfather and a mother in failing health, his adolescent life is further complicated by the realization that he is homosexual. It is only when he reaches adulthood that he is able to recognize the legacy that Georgina has passed on to him – the ability to give unconditional love and forgiveness in spite of hard times and bitterness, and the realization that there is humour in even the grimmest of situations.

Thinking back to Aunty's stories, to many of my childhood experiences with her, I realize now how much humour I had grown up with, how Aunty had always used jokes and teasing to lessen the hardships of life. For Native people, humour has always been an important part of our culture, a way to see our own idiosyncrasies and the foolishness of others. It is inherent in our stories and legends,

entwined in the very fabric of our lives and traditions. The old people love to tease and laugh, poking fun at one another in a serious world. (67)

*I Know Two Métis Women: The Lives of Dorothy Scofield and Georgina Houle Young* is Gregory Scofield's celebration of the silver lining that exists in every dark cloud. Using the honky-tonk ballads of Jimmie Rodgers, Kitty Wells, Wilf Carter, Hank Williams, and a host of other country artists as his "soundtrack," Scofield recalls the poignant, and often humorous, events in the lives of his mother and aunt. Through the use of dialect and imagery, these poems bring to us the sights, sounds, and smells of the places they visited and the rooms in which they lived, allow us to share the possessions they treasured, and introduce us to the friends and lovers with whom they sang and fought and drank.

Scofield is a talented poet whose work distills and imparts the essence of personalities and places, and does so with love and respect. The task of communicating "what it is to be a Métis" is in very good hands indeed. We have much to learn from Scofield, as we do from the elders of Prince George.