

“I write this for all of you”
Recovering the Unpublished
RCMP “Incident” in
Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973)¹

“I write this for all of you,” announces Métis author Maria Campbell in her 1973 autobiography *Halfbreed*, “to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country” (8). Campbell describes her life growing up in extreme poverty in northern Saskatchewan in the 1940s and 50s—a poverty created by the 1885 defeat at Batoche that pushed Métis claims aside in favour of European settlement. After her mother’s death and a short, failed marriage at age fifteen in a thwarted effort to keep her younger siblings together, Campbell drifted West, scrabbling together a living by whatever means she could. After two suicide attempts and a nervous breakdown, she decided, at the age of thirty-one, to confront everything that had happened to her and began to write her life story.

Her publisher, McClelland & Stewart, suspected that the book would be successful, but never anticipated that the initial print run of 4,500 copies² would immediately sell out. They ordered an additional 4,000, then another 2,500,³ and struggled in that first year of publication to keep up with demand. Professors from across Canada lobbied for a paperback edition to teach in their classes.⁴ Universities at that time had little, if any, Indigenous content, and certainly nothing from a Métis perspective.

Deanna Reder

Few understood before Campbell’s book that Métis peoples were shunted literally to the margins of society, to the sides of the roads called Road Allowances where the land had no price and no value. They were left, writes Campbell in *Halfbreed*, with “no pot to piss in or a window to throw it out”

(26). By using her autobiography to give an account of the often forgotten tales of Métis resistance against unwinnable conditions, Campbell inspired a generation of Indigenous writers to tell their own stories. Delaware playwright Daniel David Moses called her “the Mother of Us All” (Lutz 83).⁵

So it is with some hesitation that I declare that this book is special to me and my family because many would say the same. However, my ties to this book are strong, not just because I am Métis and Campbell was born in the very same part of the world as my mother, in the very same month and year—April 1940—but also because it is the only book I ever remember my mother reading. She was excited to recognize the descriptions of places, ways of living, and people, like Métis leaders Jim Brady, who lived for a while in her hometown of La Ronge, and Malcolm Norris, whose son she had briefly dated as a teenager. Looking back, I realize that this demonstrated to me how Indigenous people rarely see our lives accurately depicted in mainstream media, so that finding a book written by someone who looks and lives like us is validating and precious.

I can even go so far as to credit Campbell with inspiring my current research on the neglected and understudied canon of Indigenous writing in Canada. My doctoral work focused on Indigenous autobiography in Canada, and as a professor at Simon Fraser University I have taught *Halfbreed* often over the years.

In April 2017, I attended an international conference in Dublin where Maria Campbell had been invited to speak. Called “Untold Stories of the Past 150 Years,” the conference marked Canada’s sesquicentennial by gathering together scholars, poets, and storytellers to share examples of neglected histories. For many of us, Campbell was the highlight of the event. *Halfbreed*, after all, is one of the most famous Indigenous autobiographies published in Canada. The book explains how the state used social institutions—schools, police, media—to make Indigenous peoples ashamed of their cultures. As Campbell’s great-grandmother, Cheechum, states in the book: “They make you hate what you are” (90).

To my surprise, I ended up being seated next to Campbell herself; on the other side of Campbell was my research assistant and settler scholar, Alix Shield. Hoping to write on the publishing history of *Halfbreed* as a case study in her doctoral research, Alix asked Campbell about her manuscript, which we had heard had been handwritten on hundreds of pages of foolscap. Campbell explained that she hadn’t seen any need to keep these papers and had probably burned them. Knowing that Alix was about to go on a research

trip to Ontario that fall, I asked Campbell if there might be early drafts in the McClelland & Stewart fonds at McMaster University. She was encouraging. We promised to let her know what we found.

Alix Shield

In October, six months after our meeting in Dublin, I was visiting the McMaster University archives in Hamilton as part of a month-long research trip. Around the same time, news was breaking of the Harvey Weinstein scandal; women were coming forward with allegations of sexual assault, coercion, and harassment against the film producer. And it was only the beginning of a movement that would gain momentum over the next several months.

Deanna and I already knew, thanks to the important archival work of historian Brendan Edwards, that a particular “incident” involving the RCMP appearing in Campbell’s manuscript had been deemed by publishers as too “libellous” to include in *Halfbreed* and was removed prior to the book’s publication.⁶ We had also heard that Campbell’s autobiographical text had been revised from around 2,000 handwritten pages to less than 200 (Lutz 42). After several weeks in the archives, I set aside a day to explore Campbell’s files in the McClelland & Stewart fonds. I sat down with a pile of manuscript pages, and began skimming them for any editorial notes. Some of the names had been scratched out and changed, but otherwise the editorial marks were very minimal. About a hundred pages in, I came across a page-and-a-half that had been struck out with a giant red “X.” The excised passage contained a story from Campbell’s childhood, taking place when she was only fourteen years old:⁷

During all this time Dad worked for Bob and poached on the side, and as usual the Mounties and wardens were often at our house. We were eating fairly well, as Dad made good money from the sale of meat. One day he was away and Grannie and I were drying meat in the bush. We had a tent set up about a mile from the house and all the children were with us. I raced home to get something we’d forgotten just as three R.C.M.P drove up in a car. They said they were going to search the house as they knew Daddy had brought meat home the day before. I let them in and said that everyone else was at the store, and prayed that no one would come from the camp. While one Mountie was upstairs and another in the barn, the third followed me into the kitchen. He talked for a long time and insisted that I knew about the meat.

Suddenly he put his arm around me and said that I was too pretty to go to jail. When I tried to get away, he grabbed my hair and pulled me to him. I was frightened and was fighting back as Robbie came running into the room. He tried to hit the Mountie but was knocked to the floor. I was nearly to the door when the other one came in. All I can recall is being dragged to Grannie’s bed where the

man tore my shirt and jeans. When I came to, Grannie was crying and washing me off. I must have been in a state of shock, because I heard everything she said but could not speak or cry despite the pain. My face was all bruised and I had teeth marks all over my chest and stomach. My head felt as if my hair had been pulled out by the roots.

Grannie was afraid that Dad would come home, so she helped me upstairs and put me to bed. She told me not to tell Daddy what had happened, that if he knew he would kill those Mounties for sure and be hung and we would all be placed in an orphanage. She said that no one ever believed Halfbreeds in court; they would say that I had been fooling around with some boys and tried to blame the Mounties instead. When Daddy came home she told him that King had gone crazy and had thrown me. Dad sold King because he was afraid that I might be crippled or even killed next time. I don't know what Grannie told Robbie. After that, he always hated the police, and when he grew up he was in trouble all the time and served prison terms for assaulting policemen. My fear was so great that I even believed they would come back and beat me to make sure that I told no one. For weeks afterwards, if I heard a car coming into the yard, I would be sick to my stomach with fear. (Campbell, "Halfbreed Woman")⁸

The significance of this passage was immediately clear. I phoned Deanna soon after, whispering through the phone from the library basement. I explained that I was still in the archives and urged her to read the pages that I was about to send.

Deanna Reder

I was very familiar with the chapter in question because of the dissonance I experienced when first reading the book. I now realized that the gap I noticed in the narrative was created by the decision to simply X out the rape. Chapter Twelve, and indeed the whole book, shifts when you learn that Maria, on the brink of womanhood and growing in competence and confidence, is violated. The result is a blow to her and to her family. While in the published version there is no explanation for Robbie's subsequent rebelliousness that saw him placed "in fifteen foster homes" before eventually moving to Alaska (147), the excised passage could explain his lifelong hatred for the police and his later convictions for assaulting them.

In a 1989 interview with Hartmut Lutz, when Campbell complains that this passage was removed, she states: "That whole section makes all of the other stuff make sense. And you can almost tell at what point it was pulled out. Because there is a gap" (Lutz 42). Earlier in the story, when the family suffers the loss of their mother, Grannie Dubuque arrives to take care of the children. This relieves Maria, the eldest, from the burden of providing childcare. Now, with this missing passage recovered, one can imagine the trauma the

volunteered my secret.

~~During all this time Dad worked for Jim and poached on the side, and as usual the Mounties and wardens were often at our house. We were eating fairly well, as Dad ^{was making} made good money from the sale of ^{the} meat. One day he was away and Grannie and I were drying meat in the bush. We had a tent set up about a mile from the house and all the children were with us. I raced home to get something we'd forgotten just as three R, C, M, P. ^{men} drove up in a car. They said they were going to search the house as they knew Daddy had brought meat home the day before. I let them in and said that everyone else was at the store, and prayed that no one would come from the camp. While one Mountie was upstairs and another in the barn, the third followed me into the kitchen. He talked for a long time and insisted that I knew about the meat.~~

~~Suddenly he put his arm around me and said that I was too pretty to go to jail. When I tried to get away, he grabbed my hair and pulled me to him. I was frightened and was fighting back as Robbie came running into the room. He tried to hit the Mountie but was knocked to the floor. I was nearly to the door when the other one came in. All I can recall is being dragged to Grannie's bed where the man ^{off} tore my shirt and jeans. When I came to, Grannie was crying and washing me off. I must have been in a state of shock, because I heard everything she said but could not speak or cry despite the pain. My face was all bruised and I had teeth marks all over my chest and stomach. My head felt as if my hair had been pulled out by the roots.~~

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Excised manuscript page from "Halfbreed Woman."
Used by permission of Maria Campbell.

^{named} King and we would all be placed in an orphanage. She said that no one ever believed Halfbreeds in court; they would say that I had been fool^{ing} around with some boys and ^{had} tried to blame the Mounties instead. When Daddy came home she told him that King had gone crazy and had thrown me. Dad sold King because he was afraid that I might be crippled or even killed ^{the} next time. [I don't know what Grannie told Robbie. After that, he always hated the police, and when he grew up he was in trouble all the time and served prison terms for assaulting policemen.] My fear was so great that I even believed they would come back and beat me to make sure that I told no one. For weeks afterwards, if I heard a car coming ~~into the yard, I would be sick to my stomach with fear.~~

Grannie left us just before Christmas and never came back. She was ill with cancer. I had so much to do that I seldom had time to be sorry for myself. The children were getting older and harder to manage. My sisters needed me as they were getting to the age ^{when} where they wanted pretty dresses and were teased a lot about their poor clothes. No one wanted to housekeep for us as there was just too much to do, not enough to eat, and ^{we could only pay} we paid poor wages. We struggled along as best we could and managed to survive that winter.

Sophie, a Halfbreed woman, ^g married to a white farmer, lived about a mile from our house. She and her husband were childless, and although Sophie was hardly the motherly type, she was kind and loved children. They were extremely poor as her husband was very lazy. They were also dirty and I doubt whether the house had ever seen soap and water. Their five dogs lived in the shack with them, as well as numerous cats, and in summer the chickens wandered in and out. She was an ugly woman with a huge hooked nose, ^g grayish yellow hair and had

Excised manuscript page from "Halfbreed Woman."
Used by permission of Maria Campbell.

grandmother went through, acting as a surrogate mother, having to both care for her granddaughter after a sexual assault and hide this news from her son-in-law. Her subsequent and unexplained departure resulted in the breakup of the entire family, when they couldn't manage without her.

Also, it is in this excised passage that we read that there is a disruption in Maria's memory when she recalls being dragged to her grandmother's bed but nothing else, describing what she calls a "state of shock" that causes a sense of disassociation in which she "heard everything [Grannie] said but could not speak or cry despite the pain." With Grannie Dubuque gone, Maria had little opportunity to express her grief, so she suppressed it, dismissing her emotions by minimizing what happened: "I had so much to do that I seldom had time to be sorry for myself" (88), she writes in the book. While the passages that follow don't lament the loss of her grandmother, Campbell describes going to the school dance with her new housekeeper, Sophie, and insulting her. Asked by friends if her chaperone was her mother, Maria responds: "'That old, ugly Indian?'" and describes feeling "shame and hatred for her, myself, and the people around me" and "wanting to cry so badly, but not being able to" (90). Her lack of legal or social outlets to speak about the rape compounds her inability to voice her anger and pain until it erupts in self-damaging ways. In fact, her unmentioned physical and sexual assault by the police troubles the rest of the narrative.

Alix Shield

The excision also changes the book right from the beginning. In the Introduction to *Halfbreed*, Campbell writes about the difficulties of returning home to Saskatchewan, and explains how writing this book was part of coming to terms with her past: "Like me the land had changed, my people were gone, and if I was to know peace I would have to search within myself. That is when I decided to write about my life" (7-8).

That Campbell was even willing to share the rape publicly is extraordinary. Yet when reading the archival correspondence between members of McClelland & Stewart's editorial team, I began to realize how insistent they were about removing this passage, even though, as Campbell states, "I had insisted it stay there" (Lutz 42). When the *Halfbreed* manuscript was first sent over to McClelland & Stewart by Jim Douglas (of Vancouver publishing house Douglas & McIntyre), the editors agreed that significant revisions were required in order for it to be published. The manuscript was submitted under Campbell's legal name, June Stifle, but was to be published under the

pseudonym Maria Campbell; this name was chosen for sentimental reasons, after her great-grandmother, and not as a means of hiding her identity.⁹ The manuscript changed hands several times, and eventually landed at the desk of Jack McClelland. A memo, provided by Jim Douglas, accompanied the manuscript and described it as follows:

This is the story of her life and a grim life it has been A life of violence and meanness on the part of her men and her church and the police. Her first sexual experience was to be raped by RCMP officers in her own home—and it goes down from there. It is the round of indignity and degradation that sociologists write about. Here, an articulate, intelligent half-breed tells us what it is really like. (Douglas)

After reading through the manuscript, McClelland responds to Douglas' endorsements with skepticism:

I'm afraid that I don't agree with your assessment as to how we should proceed. Aware as I am of your usually realistic and discerning eye when it comes to manuscript evaluation, I have concluded that you must have been overwhelmed by the author's personality, by your meeting with her and possibly unduly influenced by her agent (or whatever his function is) who I suspect maybe [*sic*] prone or susceptible to the same influence. (McClelland, Letter to Douglas)

McClelland goes on to outline the significant revisions and excisions necessary before the project could proceed. This included expanding the childhood material, and condensing the later "Vancouver" section. Even in these early stages of manuscript consideration, McClelland identified the sexual assault incident as one that he believed could pose problems:

One point that really bothers me is her experience with the RCMP. I don't know, because I haven't checked with a lawyer but my suspicion is that this could not be used. The RCMP could almost certainly get an injunction stopping the distribution of the book and they almost certainly would. Then it would be up to her to prove the incident. I presume that this would be almost impossible and a messy business that she wouldn't want to be involved in. . . . I haven't any doubt about the incident itself. I am sure it occurred just as I know it occurs today, but I think the only time one can do anything about it is when it occurs. (McClelland, Letter to Douglas)

While McClelland suggests that the rape scene is not worth such legal complexities and is therefore dispensable, his approach fundamentally opposes Campbell's own reasons for writing the book "as a kind of therapy to purge myself" (qtd. in Woods). As part of the book's "Preliminary Publishing Plan," McClelland & Stewart proposed a strategy for marketing the book in which Campbell would play the role of victim to emphasize the "major

theme of injustice to be promoted personally by the author” (“Preliminary”). Yet the injustice of her sexual assault, despite her insistence at its importance, wasn’t allowed to be mentioned.¹⁰

Upon examination of the original submission, McClelland decided to move forward, under the strict condition that Campbell provide a revised draft following his recommendations, including the removal of the rape scene. But that didn’t happen. Instead, Campbell sent the manuscript back early the next year with minimal changes, prompting Executive Director Anna Porter to question her progress: “Has she in fact revised it since your correspondence with Jim’s query[?] [I]f she has, the revision has been completely unsuccessful” (Porter, Letter to McClelland). At this stage, the “RCMP Incident” was proving a point of contention between the author and her publisher. In a letter addressed to June Stifle (Campbell) on January 15, 1972, one year before the book was published, editor David Berry writes: “I don’t know if Dianne or Jack McClelland told you that we are taking out the incident with the Mounties. We’d like to keep it in, but our lawyer advises us that unless it could be proved the RCMP could get an injunction to stop the sale of the book.”

After receiving several partial revisions from Campbell over the next ten months, David Berry writes a letter to Jack McClelland in November 1972: “I thought you should know that she has re-inserted the Mountie-rape incident in the revised manuscript. Her own lawyer apparently thinks this is OK, but as we might feel differently about it I thought you should know.” Several days after this memo was sent, McClelland writes a letter to his lawyer, Mr. Robert I. Martin, asking for advice: “Sometime [sic] ago we discussed a problem relating to a book by a Métis woman . . . We concluded jointly that we could not safely include this incident. Her lawyer tells her that we could. I would like to include it if we can, but I am still of the opinion that it could lead to an injunction.”

Over the next two months, McClelland & Stewart pushed to get the book finished and into production. In a letter dated January 12, 1973, David Berry writes to Campbell with an update: “We made very few changes in the manuscript, and since there was a big rush to get it to the printer I didn’t think it would be worthwhile to send it back to you.” At this point, an internal memo was sent around McClelland & Stewart stating that they were to “drastically advance the schedule on this book” and that “we had all better give this title special attention whenever possible” (Scollard). It’s difficult to know at this stage if Campbell was being deliberately left out of editorial

conversations. By the time the master proofs were arranged in February of 1973, the entire page-and-a-half had been crossed out with red pencil, and was never mentioned again.

Deanna Reder

In January 2018, we emailed Campbell with news of Alix's discovery of the excised passage. "Wow you actually found it," she replied. "I didn't think [Jack McClelland] kept it because when I asked him for it he said he had destroyed it so I wouldn't get into trouble" ("Re: research after Dublin").

We arranged to visit her at her home in Saskatoon in late February. As we sat at Campbell's dining room table, Alix presented her with a prayer tie—tobacco wrapped in red cloth—and I gave her some sweetgrass and a small gift. Campbell brought us tea and prepared the meatloaf she was making for our lunch. Once Campbell was seated, Alix showed her the scans of the missing passage. Campbell shared how, when she received her author's copy by mail in 1973, she went directly to the point in the book where the passage should have been. That's when she discovered it had been removed.

Campbell encouraged us to write about our findings, but did not want to be involved. Now seventy-eight, she is busy as a teacher and an activist with little interest in going back to talking about those days. As our visit was drawing to a close, Campbell shared a story with us. When she was a girl her family would get assorted books for twenty-five cents a box, and she remembers that sometimes there would be a book by poet E. Pauline Johnson in the batch. Her favourite poem by Johnson was "The Cattle Thief." Campbell remembers falling upon the poem with pride—the thought that an Indigenous woman could be a writer amazed her. She used this example to explain how often in her life she had received awards, but the awards themselves were never important. What convinced her to accept them was the thought that such acknowledgements might set an example for young Indigenous girls to believe in themselves.

Halfbreed became a bestseller, and arguably remains "the most important and seminal book" written by an Indigenous woman in Canada (Lutz 41). Had this passage not been removed, the effect is, of course, impossible to say. It would have allowed the author to publicize a rape she never reported out of fear she would have been disbelieved; this might have inspired an earlier generation to consider the mechanisms that silence women. Campbell lays bare the racism that continues to complicate an Indigenous woman's account of sexual assault—as Grannie Dubuque warned in the excised passage,

“[N]o one ever believed Halfbreeds in court.” Campbell’s description of the sexual assault might have raised awareness and conversations that now, amidst today’s National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, are coming into public discussion. In the Lutz interview, Campbell is asked if she would ever like to rewrite *Halfbreed*. She responded: “Yes, some day. I don’t think I’d make changes. What I would do with the book is, I would only put in that piece that was taken out. I wouldn’t want to touch what’s there, because that was the way I was writing then, and I think that it’s important it stays that way, because that’s where I was at” (47). Only now, with the recovery of this excised passage, forty-five years since its first publication, can a reissue of Campbell’s book be done as she originally intended.

NOTES

- 1 This article was originally published on the canlit.ca website in May 2018. Maria Campbell supports the publication of the article and has granted *Canadian Literature* permission to publish it and to reproduce the original excised manuscript pages on the web and in print. Since the problems surrounding the excised pages came to light when this article first appeared on the journal’s website, there has been renewed interest in the book. Over five thousand people read the article in the weeks after it was published. A new edition of *Halfbreed* is being released in November 2019 with McClelland & Stewart. It will include the missing passage, a short introduction by Kim Anderson, and a conclusion by Maria Campbell. Further, M&S will be issuing an audiobook read by Maria Campbell herself.
- 2 See Porter, Letter to Witmer. In this letter, Anna Porter, Executive Director at McClelland & Stewart, suggests to Glenn Witmer (and copied to other M&S staff including J. G. McClelland, L. Ritchie, D. McGill) that in this initial print run of 4,500 copies, books should be sold for \$5.95. This same letter also states that *Halfbreed* “has great magazine potential,” and that they plan to send a set of galleys to *Weekend* magazine for possible publication.
- 3 See “Re-print Purchase Order for ‘Half Breed Woman’” and “Delivery required by September 26th.” Both of these purchase orders are addressed to the Alger Press (Oshawa, ON), and are signed off by Peter Scaggs, of McClelland & Stewart’s production department.
- 4 See Audley, Letter to Porter and copy to Glenn Witmer and Don Roper, 31 Aug. 1973; Audley, Letter to Porter, 28 Sept. 1973; Porter, Letter to Dave McGuill and copy to Paul Audley, 17 Oct. 1973. These letters discuss the possibility of McClelland & Stewart issuing a quality paperback version of *Halfbreed*, citing requests from professors at the University of Toronto and Brock University who expressed interest in teaching *Halfbreed*, especially if the book were offered at a lower price point.
- 5 In an interview with Hartmut Lutz, as recorded in *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors* (1991), Lenore Keeshig-Tobias credits Daniel David Moses for this quotation.
- 6 See his article in McMaster University’s *Historical Perspectives on Canadian Publishing*

digital series, titled "Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*: 'Biography with a Purpose.'" This "incident" is also discussed in Hartmut Lutz's interview with Campbell in *Contemporary Challenges*.

- 7 The authors have decided to reproduce the passage as Campbell wrote it before further edits, except for one name change to correspond to the names in the published book.
- 8 We are grateful to Maria Campbell for giving us permission to reproduce these unpublished pages from the original typescript manuscript.
- 9 See Berry, Letter to McClelland. In this letter, McClelland & Stewart editor David Berry explains to Jack McClelland that although they having been working on the *Halfbreed* manuscript with June Stifle, she has expressed that she would actually prefer "to use the name Maria Campbell as her professional nom-de-plume, but doesn't care about concealing her real identity and would not object to the use of a photo on the jacket or to in-person promotion."
- 10 A clipping from *The Globe and Mail* titled "RCMP harassing Indians, committing sexual acts against women, head of group charges" was found among the McClelland & Stewart "Halfbreed Woman" correspondence at McMaster University, addressed to the attention of editor David Berry. This article was published on January 13, 1973, only months before the publication of *Halfbreed*. Also in 1973, the same year that *Halfbreed* was published, the RCMP celebrated their organization's centennial anniversary.

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