

THE  
**TRUE**  
CANADIANS  
FORGOTTEN NEVERMORE



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# NATION BUILDING



*The art piece “Nation Building” by Métis artist Stephen Gladue features Métis leaders Louis Riel (left) and Gabriel Dumont (centre) and their struggle with Prime Minister John A. Macdonald (right). These three individuals, despite their differences, played a significant role in the development of Canada. The piece depicts Riel and Macdonald as “two bulls” who fought over the Métis Bill of Rights that Riel is clutching in his hand, the decimation of the buffalo, and Macdonald’s role in building the railway through the Métis Homeland at all costs.*

# FOREWORD

In recent decades, the Métis in Alberta have made enormous strides toward the self-governance they have aspired to achieve ever since their earliest days as a Nation. Seeing their rights enshrined in the Constitution Act of 1982, along with the First Nations and the Inuit, represented a dramatic milestone along that journey. Forty years later, this book is a testament to all the achievements that President of the Métis Nation of Alberta, Audrey Poitras, and so many other Métis leaders have brought about since gaining that critical recognition.

In 2004, I had the pleasure as Prime Minister of Canada to convene the first-ever Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable in Ottawa. MNA President Poitras attended this event, in the role she then held as Vice-President of the Métis National Council. The occasion marked the Government of Canada's renewed focus on Indigenous issues. I pledged then my commitment to working toward ensuring Indigenous peoples had greater authority in deciding how to improve their standards in education, housing, health, and economic development. From the foundation of historic rights and agreements, we agreed to work together toward greater economic self-reliance and a better quality of life for the Métis, First Nations, and Inuit.

Since leaving public office, I have continued to take an active role in advocating on behalf of the Métis and other Indigenous peoples in Canada. The Martin Family Initiative is proud to have worked with the Métis, First Nations, and Inuit to support education, health, and the overall wellbeing of children, youth, and adults. And I have been pleased to witness the continued progress the Métis have made in their relations with the Government of Canada. I was especially delighted to see that, in 2019, the Métis Nation of Alberta signed the historic Métis Government Recognition and Self-Government Agreement with the Government of Canada. It is the first ever self-government agreement between the federal government and a Métis government. The Agreement explicitly recognizes the inherent and constitutionally protected right of the Métis in Alberta to self-government and creates a process for them to be recognized as an Indigenous government in federal legislation. This achievement marks a giant step toward self-government, and I am thrilled to congratulate President Poitras and the entire Métis Nation of Alberta on their success.

In 2022, exactly 40 years after the Constitution Act, the Alberta Métis achieved another monumental milestone: their own Constitution. The Otipemisiwak Métis



Government Constitution marks a turning point in the age-old struggle for recognition and reconciliation. The Constitution will provide a solid foundation of self-governance for the oldest and most enduring Métis government in Canada. In documenting the realization of this dream, *The True Canadians* will take its place as a lasting record of the journey to self-governance for the proud and enduring Métis people of Alberta.

*Right Honourable Paul E. Martin*





## THE VICTOR'S HISTORY

They say history is written by the victors and reflects their prejudices. Though the Métis have a rich oral and written storytelling tradition, Pierre Falcon being one of their earliest and most renowned poets, colonial histories penned in Canada have often painted an inaccurate and disdainful portrait of the Métis, giving non-Indigenous students erroneous impressions. As recently as 2006, historian Desmond Morton portrayed Cuthbert Grant as a renegade whose compatriots harassed the Selkirk settlers, trampled their crops, and “shot down twenty-one men from the colony and mutilated some of the corpses.” Also in 2006, Robert Bothwell wrote that in 1885, the government tried to negotiate with Louis Riel, rather than the other way around, but his “messianic fervour” rebutted any agreement. By 2012, Margaret Conrad would finally take a softer view, acknowledging that in 1869 the Métis objective at Red River was to defend themselves from “Canadian imperialism.” In Alberta, thanks to various books produced in recent years and a series of theme books produced by the Rupertsland Institute that are now used at the University of Alberta, a more accurate narrative is emerging. Getting the story right is essential to fostering the proud community the Métis seek.

# INTRODUCTION

For over two centuries, the Métis have fought for recognition as an Indigenous people and as a Nation. This struggle has occurred on the battlefield, in the courts, and at the negotiating table, often over issues of governance, land rights, and resources. The Métis are commonly associated with Louis Riel and the 1869 Red River Resistance in Manitoba and the 1885 North-West Resistance in Saskatchewan. But starting in the late 1700s, during the fur trade era, the Métis were already becoming instrumental in the development of Western Canada and were nurturing a Homeland that came to encompass the entirety of latter-day Alberta. That contribution went virtually unrecognized. It would be nearly another one hundred years after the last famous armed Métis resistance before Canada, in the Constitution Act of 1982, would recognize Métis rights. For the Métis in Alberta, this recognition brought the dream of self-government within reach. This book describes the accomplishments and progress of the Métis Nation of Alberta (MNA) on behalf of its Métis citizens since the Constitution Act. The title, inspired by the MNA anthem, reflects on the Métis lineage to the original inhabitants of this land, and the Métis struggle for acceptance as a distinct people.

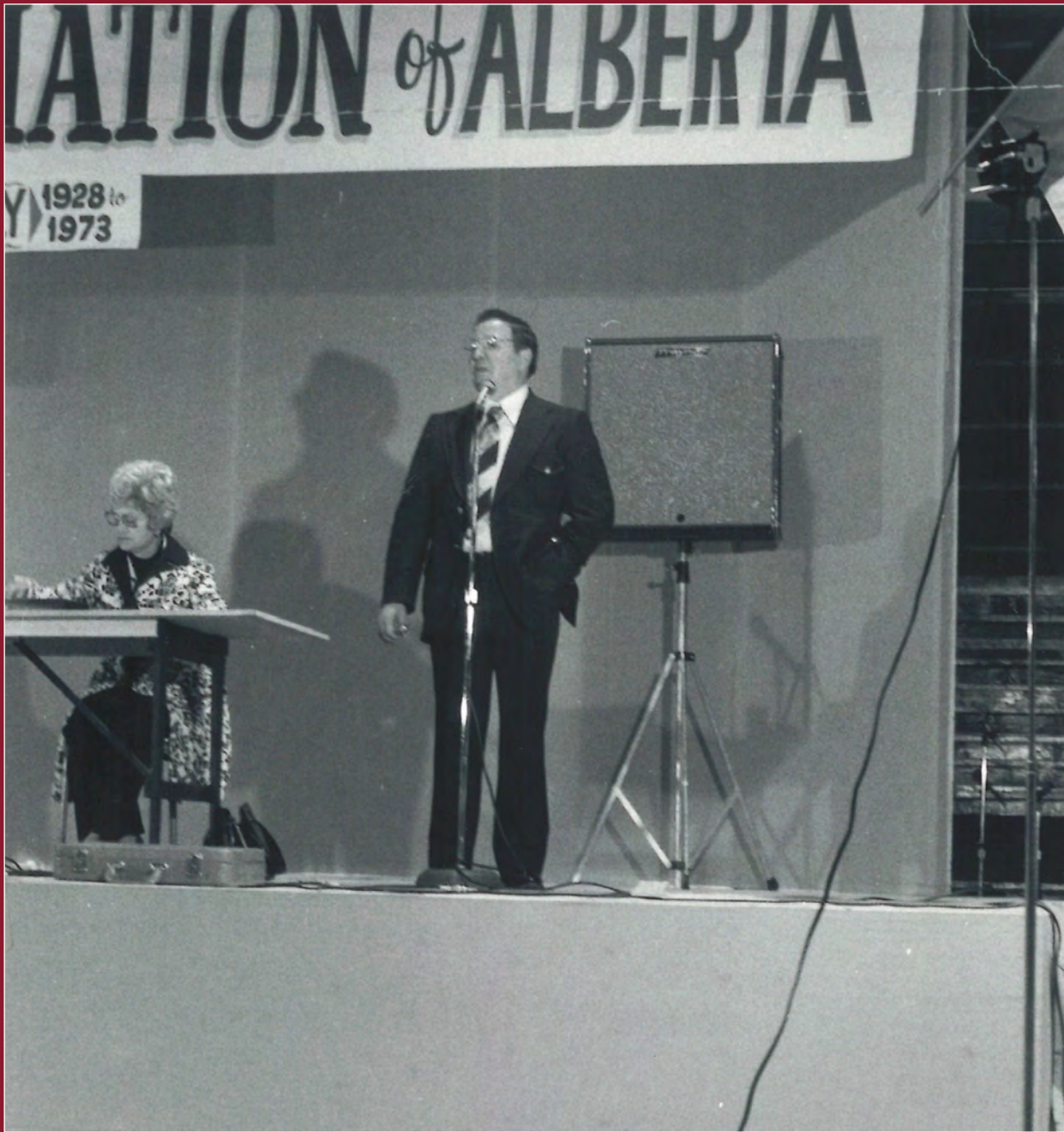
The book's first two sections – Recognition and Community – encompass the two parallel courses the Métis have taken, described



as canoes paddling upriver side-by-side. One set of canoes symbolizes the mission to achieve recognition, self-government, and strong relations with Canada (Chapters 1-8) and the other set symbolizes the resurgence of a fiercely proud and resilient Métis nationhood (Chapters 9-16). The third section – Reconciliation – represents the merging of the two parallel courses, or the canoes coming together in unison. This progress is illustrated in visual form on pages 60-61. Reconciliation brings together societal acknowledgement of historical

wrongs committed by colonization with the personal and communal healing arising from recognizing these harms. The book provides a thorough, detailed description of the many ways the Métis Nation of Alberta has advanced over 40 years and longer. It also describes the significance of the new Otipemisiwak Métis Government Constitution to the socio-economic advancement and cultural wellbeing of the Métis people of Alberta, as the pursuit of self-government is realized.





## THE NAME OF THE GAME

**S**tan Daniels first won the presidency of the Métis Association of Alberta in 1967. Under his leadership, the organization experienced expansive growth in membership, giving the Métis greater clout in provincial politics. In 1969, the objectives of the Association were amended to advance at all possible occasions the interests of the Métis people and coordinate the efforts of the Métis for the purpose of promoting their common interests through collective action. Daniels was known for his advocacy of the need for stronger educational programs. In a video posted during his presidency, Daniels said “What we lack right now is education. We are behind by a whole generation. Every effort is going to have to be made by every man, woman, and child to get educated ... to get into the social and economic development of this country.” Knowledge, he said, “is the name of the game.”



# PART 1 – RECOGNITION

A firming Métis rights in the Constitution Act of 1982 symbolized a major moment in the history of the true Canadians. Since then, as chronicled in Part 1, the Métis in Alberta have made major inroads in their relations with Canada. In 2017, Canada and the Métis Nation of Alberta signed a framework agreement that started formal negotiations to address Métis rights and resolve long-standing grievances. The agreement truly marked the beginning of a new nation-to-nation relationship.





# 1 THE MÉTIS NATION



## HISTORY AND RECOGNITION

For generations, the Métis have struggled for recognition and justice, beginning well prior to the Dominion of Canada being created in 1867 and extending long after Métis rights were enshrined in the Constitution Act of 1982. In school, many Canadians learn about the 1869 Red River Resistance in Manitoba and the 1885 Northwest Resistance in Saskatchewan, and the famed Métis leader in both instances, Louis Riel. Less well known is the fact that the original Métis Homeland existed long before and across much larger territory than the locations of these two seminal events. Tracing their roots to the fur trade of the 1700s, the Métis Homeland stretched from the riverways of the Great Lakes in Ontario across the prairies to BC and into the Northwest Territories.

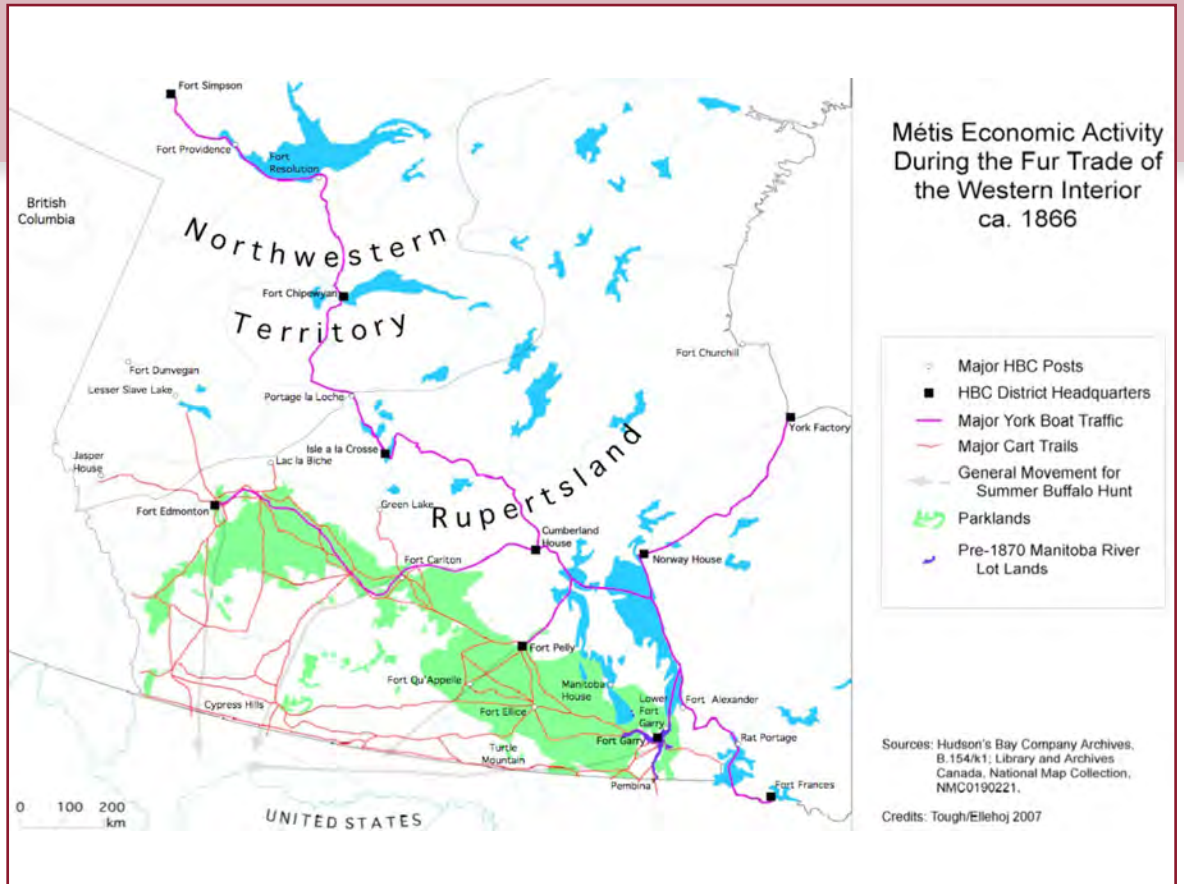
The Métis were known to be intensely independent and were instrumental to the development of Western Canada. They became intermediaries between European and Indigenous cultures, working as guides, interpreters, fur traders and provisioners to the forts and trading companies that were coming to populate the region called Rupert's Land. This vast territory was named for Prince Rupert of Rhine, a cousin of King Charles II of England. In 1670, the King granted a Charter to the Hudson's Bay Company for the sole trade and commerce of the entirety of Rupert's Land, which extended throughout much of present-day Canada, including northern parts of Ontario and Quebec, and all of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. Rupert was the Company's first appointed governor. By the early 1800s, the Métis had begun to develop a political consciousness and a collective sense of community and nationhood and were challenging the Hudson's Bay Company's monopoly of the fur trade.

### EVOLVING LEGACIES

In popular historical accounts, Canada's first prime minister, John A. Macdonald, has routinely been credited as a champion of nationhood, and historic Métis leader Louis Riel as rebellious and opportunistic. Pierre Berton wrote in 1971 that Riel would have abandoned the cause of the Métis in 1885 for the right price, and Desmond Morton repeated this impression in 2006 while characterizing Macdonald as a "nation-builder." Robert Bothwell similarly described Macdonald in 2006 as the prime minister who created a nation through the railway, and Riel as a "foolish" leader who "slipped out the rear gate" when the military descended on Red River in 1870. These perceptions are starting to evolve. In Montreal, after a statue of Macdonald was decapitated during a 2020 anti-racism protest, a committee advised the city not to restore the statue, given Macdonald's "assimilationist and genocidal policies." In 2013, *Historica Canada* wrote that Riel's former status as a "rebel" has been largely replaced by the recognition that he was "a visionary whose principles resonate with many Métis and Canadians today."

At the Red River Settlement, or the location of present-day Winnipeg, the Métis had established by 1814 a thriving community. But the area had also become recently occupied by Scottish Europeans known as the Selkirk Settlers, named for Thomas Douglas, the 5<sup>th</sup> Lord Selkirk, who was said to have founded the colony in 1812. In 1814, to monopolize trade, Governor Miles MacDonell issued a proclamation banning the export of pemmican, which the Métis depended upon as a trading commodity. He then





banned the buffalo hunt in the Settlement. In 1816, fed up with these attacks on their economy and way of life, a Métis force led by Cuthbert Grant engaged in gunfire with a party of colonists. Routing their opponent, the battle became known to the Métis as the Victory of Frog Plain, and to others as the Battle of Seven Oaks. The victory is largely regarded as the emergent, defining moment of a unique Métis identity.

By the 1860s, the Métis had asserted themselves many times as an Indigenous Nation in the Northwest. Yet the Euro-Canadians ignored their rights and began moving into the Métis Homeland and claiming it for themselves. In 1869, England, the Hudson's Bay Company, and Canada negotiated the transfer of Rupert's Land to the Dominion. The Métis were left out of the negotiations and feared

their rights would not be respected. These concerns sparked the Red River Resistance, the first of the two conflicts for which Louis Riel is commonly known. Riel and others exiled the Governor, took possession of Fort Garry, established a Provisional Government, drafted a *Bill of Rights*, and began negotiations with the Government of Canada for the creation of the province of Manitoba.

During this time, a colonist named Thomas Scott participated in an attempt to overthrow the Provisional Government, for which he was tried and sentenced to execution. In 1870, Parliament passed the *Manitoba Act*, which included some parts of the *Bill of Rights*. Even though the Act guaranteed the Métis 1.4 million acres of land, Prime Minister John A. Macdonald instead sent an expeditionary force to assert federal authority. Several wanted to arrest Riel or worse

due to the death of Scott, and before their arrival, he was forced to flee. In subsequent years, Riel returned to Manitoba and was elected to Parliament three times, but each time MPs voted to oust him for his role in the Resistance and finally banished him from the country.

After the Red River Resistance, many other Métis also left, moving west to join other existing Métis communities. Those who stayed were subjected to discrimination and racism. Métis communities in Saskatchewan and Alberta also began to experience racism and displacement as an influx of Euro-Canadians settled in the Métis Homeland. In the late 1870s, Métis communities in Alberta organized to press for their rights. For example, they petitioned Canada for assistance with their claims to land at Blackfoot Crossing south of Calgary, in the Cypress Hills area south of Medicine Hat, and in St. Albert northwest of Edmonton. These efforts were met with hollow promises or no response. In 1884, under Gabriel Dumont, the Métis around Batoche in Saskatchewan were exhausted with their attempts to negotiate going unanswered. They asked Riel to join them, and he returned from exile in the United States. In 1885, in what became known as the North-West Resistance, the Métis fought Canadian troops in a series of armed skirmishes, climaxing in the Battle of Batoche. For the Métis, defeat



came down to one critical factor: Canada's military had more ammunition. The Métis scattered. But this time, Riel surrendered himself, hoping to protect the community. Macdonald had him tried for high treason, and he was hanged in Regina on November 16, 1885, with many suggesting it was more as revenge for the death of Thomas Scott than due to the Resistance.

A prolonged period of disenfranchisement followed. Pushed out of their homes, many Métis lived in makeshift shantytowns or in areas set aside for future road construction, where they were called "Road Allowance People." In 1885, the year of the Resistance in Saskatchewan, Canada responded to Métis land claims by establishing the scrip system,

whereby the Métis were offered a certificate they could trade for land or money to purchase land. The system was rife with fraud and abuse, the bulk of the scrip ending up in the hands of land speculators and most Métis getting nothing. Meanwhile, the Métis tried to reorganize. The Association des Métis Alberta et les Territoires du Nord-Ouest was formed in 1928, becoming the Métis Association of Alberta (MAA) in 1932, mandated to push the government for rights and land.

After the failures of the scrip system, and in response to MAA lobbying, Alberta appointed a Royal Commission to examine and report on Métis health, education, homelessness, and land issues. In 1934, the Ewing Commission recommended







that the province provide the Métis with a secure land base. Four years later, the province created 12 Métis colonies, later reduced to eight. They remain today the only collectively held Métis lands in Canada. But the Métis inhabiting these communities had little governing power, as the provincial government retained most decision-making authority. It wasn't until the 1960s, buried in a continual nightmare of displacement and prejudice, that the Métis Nation on the prairies began reorganizing effectively. But as Canada entered three decades of constitutional debates, a federal government embroiled in re-shaping Canada for its non-



*A meeting of the MAA board after being elected earlier that day on the Assembly floor in the 1970s.*



Indigenous citizens had little time for the country's first inhabitants, the First Nations, Inuit, or Métis.

In the early 1980s, when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau sought to patriate Canada's Constitution, the Métis saw an opportunity to secure the recognition they'd been chasing since Cuthbert Grant led the Métis in 1816 in the Victory of Frog Plain. But in their efforts for inclusion in the Constitution, the Métis faced similarly resistant attitudes as Grant over 160 years earlier. Enter Harry Daniels, a dynamic and charismatic social activist whose ancestors fought with Grant at Frog Plain. Daniels had become a force of influence among the Métis, and had held several leadership roles. In 1981, Daniels went to Ottawa to push for Métis inclusion in the Constitution. He faced stiff resistance, but eventually secured assurances from

*Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (left) and Queen Elizabeth II at signing of Constitution Act, 1982.*





Larry Desmeules, MNA president 1988-1993.

Jean Chrétien, Justice Minister at the time, that the Act would explicitly recognize the Métis as one of three distinct Indigenous peoples whose existing rights were recognized and affirmed.

A year later, after intense consultations with the MAA, it was Alberta Premier Peter Lougheed who proposed the final wording for what became section 35(1) of the Constitution Act, 1982: "The existing

Aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed. In this Act, 'aboriginal peoples of Canada' includes the Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada." Though it would prove to be a huge milestone, for many years the Métis continued to find their rights denied. Little wonder, given that non-Indigenous perceptions of the Métis remained couched in an ignorance and indifference made evident by the history books. In *Twentieth Century Canada*, published in 1983, the authors wrote that inclusion of Indigenous rights in the Constitution were "minor modifications" made in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. In *A Short History of Canada*, also published in 1983, Desmond Morton wrote that Indigenous organizations "brought a few changes, but not many Canadians cared." Neither reference mentioned the Métis by name.



Jean Chrétien (standing, left) and Harry Daniels (standing, second from right) during Constitutional negotiations.



*Steve Powley at the Supreme Court of Canada.*

For decades after the Constitution Act of 1982, the federal government continued to exclude the Métis from programs and any processes to address Métis land settlements. In 1990, MAA President Larry Desmeules told the audience at the Annual General Assembly that the Métis in Alberta



*Métis lawyer Jason Madden (right) and Tony Belcourt, founding President of Métis Nation of Ontario and former MNA executive.*

had always known they were a Nation, and should no longer be thought of as a society. In 1991, the MAA changed its name to the Métis Nation of Alberta Association (MNA) as an assertion of Métis nationhood. But it was Harry Daniels, finally, who once again stepped up, and in 1999 took the government to court. The case took 17 years and two appeals. In 2016, in *Daniels v. Canada*, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the Crown had a fiduciary relationship with Aboriginal peoples, including the Métis, and that this responsibility was, in fact, spelled out in the Constitution Act of 1867, all the way back when Canada first became

a Dominion. The decision complemented a 2003 ruling, when the Supreme Court confirmed in the case of *R. v. Powley* that Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 protects Métis rights. And in 2013, the Supreme Court confirmed the federal government needed to address the matter of the land promised to the Métis in Manitoba back in 1870. The 2016 ruling paved the way for fresh discussions with the federal government, and that year Canada agreed to establish negotiations with the MNA, at last setting the Alberta Métis on the path toward recognition and modern-day self-government.





## MIMICKING THE MÉTIS

When Prime Minister John A. Macdonald sent troops to Red River instead of negotiating with Louis Riel, pulling away the proverbial football, he unwittingly played into a history of popular culture mimicking the fortunes of the Métis. And not just in cartoons. Famous movies and novels have often told parallels to the Métis plight, given storytelling's age-old obsession with the underdog. Tracing Métis history, the *Star Wars* saga recounts the resurgence of a democratic Republic displaced by the villainous Galactic Empire. The original *Avatar* movie, a science fiction retelling of colonial conquests in North

and South America, describes a militant corporation's efforts to drive the Na'vi out of their homeland on Pandora to exploit the planet's natural resources. In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the evil Lord Voldemort is set on destroying all the Muggles and those of mixed ancestry called half-bloods and take over the world. Other examples abound. But there the similarities end. In these fanciful tales, the disenfranchised achieve miraculous, timely restoration. For the Métis, resurgence has taken hundreds of years and the story is yet to conclude.