RESOURCES OF HOPE

JEAN TEILLET

Ms. Teillet's legal career has focused on Indigenous rights and reproductive rights. She is currently a treaty negotiation advisor for the Stó:lō Xwexwilmexw, a coalition of six Stó:lō bands in BC. Ms. Teillet has appeared at the Supreme Court of Canada in twelve Indigenous rights cases. She maintains an active role as a public speaker on Indigenous rights, identity, access to justice and Charter issues. She is the author of *Métis Law in Canada* and her popular history, *The North-West is Our Mother: The Story of Louis Riel's People, the Métis Nation*, was listed in *The Globe and Mail*'s top 100 books of 2019. Ms. Teillet is an adjunct professor of law at UBC. She is on the board of Indspire, Save the Children Canada and the Association of Canadian Studies. She has been awarded three honorary doctorates: Guelph University (2014), the Law Society of Upper Canada (2015) and University of Windsor (2017). In 2016, the Association of Ontario Midwives made Jean an honorary lifetime member in recognition of her services to midwives and Indigenous women. Best Lawyers in Canada 2019 ranked Ms. Teillet as a "best lawyer" in Vancouver and Chambers and Partners ranks her nationally as a "leading lawyer". Ms. Teillet is the great grandniece of Louis Riel.

I have two stories of hope.

My first story of hope comes from my Métis ancestry. I am a great grandniece of Louis Riel. I was raised to be very proud of my heritage in a time when Métis was a derogatory term and Riel was generally dismissed as an insane traitor. That was what most Canadians thought and were taught. But I was taught differently. I was taught to be proud, very proud, of being a Riel.

In the early 1900s my grandfather was on a historical committee for the Union nationale métisse St-Joseph du Manitoba. They commissioned, edited and worked hard to publish their own story, the first popular history of the Métis Nation. *Histoire de la nation métisse dans l'ouest Canadien* was published in 1935 and I've just written what I believe is the only other popular history written by the Métis.[1] *The North-West is Our Mother: the Story of Louis Riel's People, the Métis Nation* was published

1 Trémaudan, A. H. de. *Histoire de la nation métisse dans l'ouest Canadien*. (Montreal: Éditions Albert Lévesque, 1935). Translated by Elizabeth Maguet as *Hold High Your Heads: History of the Métis Nation of Canada*. (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1982).

in 2019.[2] The point of both books was to tell history from a different point of view, from the Métis perspective. Both books reject the settler's version of history, which is what most people are taught in school and most Canadians believe is the history of Canada's acquisition of the North-West. The Canadian state has constructed and perpetuated its own version of its history and it doesn't have very much to do with what the Indigenous people did or what actually happened.



Louis Riel's provisional government, 1869-70

Let me give you an example of history that is virtually unknown. It is the story of what actually happened when Canada acquired Manitoba and the North-West in 1870. In that year on July 1st, while Canada Day was being celebrated in eastern and central Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald was preparing an armed attack on the people who were about to become Canadian citizens. Since January of 1870 the Prime Minister had quietly been assembling an army, largely composed of Orange Lodge members.[3] On July 1st 1870 this army was waiting at Fort William on Lake Superior. Waiting for July 15th when Canada legally acquired the North-West so that they could head out to Winnipeg. They arrived in Winnipeg in the end of August and immediately began a two-year reign of terror in which they engaged in unchecked murder, arson, rape, home invasions, and brutal assaults of Metis people. Some of the Orange Lodge militia members took vows to exterminate all those connected with Riel's provisional government.[4] Theirs was a white, supremacist, protestant vision of what they wanted Canada to be. Sir John A. Macdonald was also a member of the Orange Lodge and he tacitly supported the reign of terror. The vicious campaign was so notorious that the *New York Times* called it a "military reign of terror". The Orange Lodge had a grand plan, their "ascendency" plan, to ascend to all positions of power. Through the brutality of the military reign of terror and their political connections they succeeded. Their brutal suppression of the Métis and their removal of virtually all French

2 Teillet, Jean. *The North-West is Our Mother: The Story of Louis Riel's People, the Métis Nation*. (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2019)

3 Approximately 2/3 of the Red River Expedition was made up of Orange Lodge members. Houston, Cecil J. and William J. Smyth. *The Sash Canada Wore: A Historical Geography of the Orange Order in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); Waite, P. B. *Canada 1874–1896: Arduous Destiny* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971). The full name of the Orange Lodge was the Loyal Orange Association of British America. It was a society characterized by its penchant for violence and secrecy. Its members viewed Catholics and French as disloyal and culturally inferior. By 1860 there were over twenty lodges in Toronto alone. It is estimated that fully one-third of all Protestant men over twenty-one in Canada were members of the Orange Lodge. In the late nineteenth century, Toronto was known as the "Belfast of Canada," a reference to the Orange influences in municipal government. The Orange Lodge permeated all levels of the English-Canadian establishment. The Orange Lodge is still very active in Canada in 2020.

4 *1869–70 Select Committee Report*, 140, "Memorandum connected with Fenian Invasion of Manitoba in October, 1871," Lieutenant-Governor Archibald, November 1871.

speaking Catholic men from positions of influence enabled the ascendancy. The members of the Lodge who came west with the militia were rewarded with land and became the first of many generations of politicians, police, politicians, lawyers, mayors and judges in Manitoba.

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In my family, because we are Riels, we kept the story of the reign of terror alive and I grew up learning the stories of what really happened, not the stories of how wonderful it was when the North-West joined Canada, but the stories of what was actually going on in Manitoba in the 1870s. I was raised with this understanding – that the history one is taught in school is not the Indigenous peoples history of Canada because it tells none of their stories. To date, it has generally been silent on the stories of the people who stood up against injustice and inequality.

Riel created a provisional government in Manitoba that had an Ojibwe representative on it. The practice of his government was to speak in English, French or Ojibwe and there was translation. He had an egalitarian vision of government in 1869 and if it had continued, we would be in a different Canada today because Indigenous peoples would have been a valued part of the decision-making in



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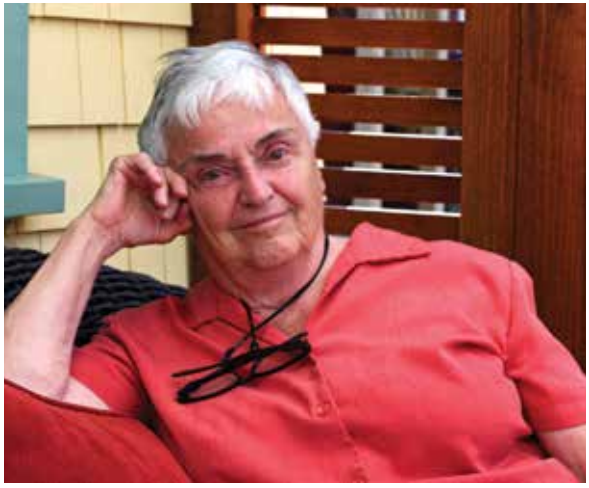
this country. Indigenous people would have had a voice and a say. Instead, after Canada acquired the North-West, Métis were tried and jailed and killed. They were cheated out of their lands. Women and girls were raped, some were gang raped by the soldiers. No soldier faced criminal charges for any of the violence. And this was not war. There was no violence to be put down in Red River at the time. So it should be remembered that Canada’s first act of governance in the North-West was to instigate and perpetuate a two and a half year reign of terror on its own people.

My ancestors fought back against the reign of terror and the injustices and the theft of their land. They fought and died for a vision of Canada that was simply impossible in their day. But they still fought for that vision. Canadian history says Riel was

hanged for treason. But he was hanged for trying to preserve his people and for his basic belief that the Métis were equal to white Anglo-Saxon protestants. He hoped that this equality would become a fact in the future. That vision was the story of hope I learned as a child and it is the story I still believe Canada needs to hear. Canadians need to hear the truth of Canada's history, but they also need to hear about the men and women who hoped for and stood up for a different vision of Canada, one that could guide us today.



Kathleen Teillet, Jean's mother, at 90 years of age

My second story of hope comes from 1963. I was 10 and my mother, who is not Metis, was in a women's singing group called the Sweet Adelines. They sang in a choir and also in quartets. My mother was on the executive of the Sweet Adelines in Winnipeg, which was part of the American organization. When the bylaws were changed to ensure that membership was restricted to "white" women my mother put forward a motion to protest it or at the very least to exempt Canadian chapters from having to adhere to the restriction. But not one of the ninety plus women members in Winnipeg even seconded the motion. All the others argued that they would not be allowed to compete in the States and might even be dismissed from the international organization entirely.

My mother decided that she had to take a stand. What I remember is her conclusion. That no one should be judged or excluded based on the colour of their skin. She knew that if she didn't stand up for what she believed, her children would never learn to stand up against racism and injustice. My mother quit and the story hit the press. She lost friends and never sang in public again. She knew the by-laws weren't going to change and that Black women wouldn't be admitted in Winnipeg, and she certainly knew it would have no effect on what was happening in the United States. But she did it for her children.

There's an expression coined by Raymond Williams called the "resources of hope".[5] I use it here somewhat differently than Williams intended. I adopt the phrase as appropriate because I believe my mother was investing in her children, her resources of hope. She couldn't change her friends or the racist institution, but she could make sure that her children knew to stand up when they met racism and injustice. We were well steeped in injustice

5 Williams, Raymond. *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (New York and London: Verso, 1988).

from my Métis side of the family, but my mother's act of courage was her investment in her children as the resources of hope for the future of this country. My mother's action has been a life-long inspiration for me.

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Canada has many racist elements and institutions – in our criminal justice system, our education system, our judicial system – in every part of this country. But I hope there is a future Canada in the making that can and will be different. We are not the hateful, misogynistic, blatantly racist country we were in 1870. We are not the same as we were in 1963 either. I think Riel invested in a better vision of Canada and the Métis died for a vision that, 150 years later, we're just edging toward. But they acted on it and they passed it down to their children and to their children's children and to me now, the third generation. Their message was that it's worth it to fight these battles. Big battles like Riel fought and small battles like my mother fought. They may have seemed hopeless at the time. But they did it anyway. They stood their ground and made their statement.

These stories of hope look to a better future where this country will be a better place to stand for all people, especially for Indigenous people and people of colour.