

Review: by David Kim-Cragg 2017

Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* is a memoir of life growing up as a metis woman. Campbell's memories capture patterns of experience that continue to be shared by indigenous and metis people within the nation of Canada today. Writing in the early 1970s, Campbell's articulation of the problems experienced by herself and her people reflect the growing political consciousness of the American Indian Movement (AIM) and second-wave feminism.

The book opens with a very short chapter setting Campbell's life story in the historical context of the Red River and Northwest Rebellions. The beginning of Chapter Two explains the decision of the Metis to first try to farm and then to abandon farming, a trajectory that led to their impoverishment and marginalization within Canadian society. While effectively communicating in a short space the kernel of the historical perspective of the Metis, readers should beware of two points. First, Campbell's claim that indigenous leaders and their people joined the Metis in the Riel Rebellion has been contested. Second, her assertion that Metis "did not have the kind of thing inside them that makes farmers" might also be challenged as an essentializing claim that is contradicted by historical evidence. But she does describe the effort Metis people made to improve the land under difficult conditions and how their failure to meet government requirements eventually forced them off the land to become "the road allowance people."

On the whole Campbell's text rings true and comes across with a force of first hand experience. Born in 1940, Campbell experienced one year at residential school and tells of being worked hard, punished for speaking her native tongue, drilled in religion but spending little time on academic lessons. She recounts being mocked as a "gopher eater" and the stigma she carried as a halfbreed in town or at the community school. She shares what she saw and experienced of Metis culture, its joyful and more destructive aspects.

Campbell's memories touch on CCF policies during the 1950s and the disdain Metis people felt for their programs of "relief work." But she remembers John Diefenbaker as a man that was respected by the Metis community as a lawyer who would take your case no matter who you were. The relationship with the government was always fraught with tension. Her family's reliance on hunting and trapping made them vulnerable to legislation that arbitrarily limited this activity. Her father, for example, spent months in jail for hunting in a national park. Her family often felt threatened by the prospect of social workers coming to take herself and the other children away because of their poverty. But the politics of the 1950s sowed division in the Metis community. Campbell powerfully tells how government meddling and bribery scuttled an attempt by the Metis community of Saskatchewan to organize and left her father accused of being a communist and a broken man.

More than politics, her memoirs delve consistently into her experience of religion. The complicated relationship of her family and the Metis community with the Catholic church is explored. Differences between Catholic and Protestant practices and identities are treated with some humour. Lessons in indigenous spiritual wisdom received from her beloved Grandmother, Cheechum, are shared. Campbell returns to her grandmother often in the telling of her life story, a figure of wisdom and stability in her life. Campbell also spends a great deal of time talking about the racial divisions she saw and experienced on the prairies and in Vancouver. The last chapters of her book explore with raw force the ways her internalized racism led her away from her community, into a life of drugs and prostitution and finally, following a mental breakdown, into hospital.