

# GABRIEL DUMONT: A PERSONAL MEMORY

JOHN ANDREW KERR

AT the Crossing of the South Saskatchewan in 1872 I first met Gabriel Dumont, Riel's right-hand-man in the rebellion of '85. It is so highly improbable that another white man still lives who came to know Dumont as intimately as I did in those days of my early youth, that I have come to believe that these recollections of mine have a real value in any character-study of the old rebel. Scores of men, veterans of '85 included, will be turning back the pages, during this 50th anniversary of the North-West Rebellion, and Gabriel Dumont is bound to stride into the limelight. But—who knows?—I may be the "sole survivor" who can speak, with first-hand knowledge, of the Gabriel Dumont whose word was practically law over broad stretches of the prairies, sixty-three years ago! And I am in a position to correct many misconceptions under which it has been Gabriel's lot to labour.

This powerful half-breed must have been 34 years of age in 1872, but I judged him to be about forty because of his thickset appearance. He was of medium height, square of shoulder, with a homely but kind face, and his chin was adorned with a scraggly beard. He was by no means huge, as so many writers have depicted him, and would not have weighed at that time more than 165 or 170 pounds. His father, Ai-caw-pow, and his uncle, Skakas-ta-ow, (these are phonetic spellings!) were over six feet in height, however, and heavily built.

These two, Gabriel's father and uncle, were leaders of the Métis Plain-hunters, and to them more than to Gabriel was due the peace pact with the Sioux. Many a night while on the plains—raw lad that I was, and the only white man in a band of half-breeds and Indians—I've sat by and listened to these aged councillors at their nightly council, as they made their arrangements for the following day, and appointed the captain who was to act as leader. The Plain Hunters were thorough in their proceedings. Before starting out from their settlement of St. Laurent for their hunting-grounds, a meeting would be called, councillors appointed to the number of ten or twelve, then others would be chosen as captains. A leader called the council together in the evenings. The

soldiers, including all the remainder of the hunters, did the work of making the corral and herding the horses into their nightly quarters, keeping up fires, setting watch over the corral during the hours of darkness, and letting the ponies out at early dawn. Among the councillors, Gabriel, his father and uncle were easily the most important; though in a pinch they all involuntarily turned to Gabriel. I remember one occasion when the camp was without meat for days. Captain after captain had scouted the prairies for buffalo signs with no success. Gabriel was then asked to try his powers. He started early the following morning, returned at noon with an antelope slung across his horse's back, ordered camp to be struck—and that night we camped in sight of countless buffaloes!

Gabriel Dumont was not an ignorant Métis, as a certain magazine writer asserts. Far from it. He knew many different Indian dialects, and spoke Cree (his mother's tongue) with great facility. He had a remarkable memory, and could read and write in French; so could his brothers Eli—who was killed at Duck Lake—and Edouard. The latter could also read music.

Another odd assertion was made by this same journalist, to the effect that Gabriel's caravan assumed huge proportions, that at times there were as many as 1,500 under his leadership. This is sheer nonsense. Gabriel never had a caravan; the Métis hunted as I have stated, with a council in control, captains under them, and soldiers under the captains. I was one of the soldiers composing Gabriel's band in '72-'73, when there were between two and three hundred souls, Métis and Indians; and my partner, Ambroise Fisher, an educated Métis, told me that this camp of '73 was the largest he ever saw. Gabriel confirmed this. In fact the whole settlement of St. Laurent, where Père and André had charge, contained but a handful of people.

Hunting the buffalo ceased in 1876 or 1877. My last connection with Dumont was in the summer of 1876 at Fort Carlton, while the Indian Treaties—to which I was one of the subscribing witnesses—were being consummated by Lieutenant-Governor Alexander Morris, at that place, and at Fort Pitt. I acted, by turns, as teamster, guide and copyist, in Gov. Morris's party. But the four preceding years held for me many associations with Dumont. For instance, in the spring of '73, a number of Métis built for Lawrence Clarke, factor at Fort Carlton, a road from the North Saskatchewan opposite Fort Carlton to Green Lake. There were forty or so in this number, and Gabriel, in whose tent I slept,

and for whose gang I cooked, was among those engaged in the work, and to whom Clarke showed much friendliness.

In 1875, Dumont organized at St. Laurent a sort of provisional government on the same principle that prevailed in the hunting expeditions, viz.: a President, with a Council composed of eight or ten members. Governor Morris sent word to General Selby Smyth, who took a detachment of fifty Mounted Police to St. Laurent, and had an interview with Dumont, who agreed to abandon the enterprise. Morris was afraid that the action of Gabriel and Father André might have a bad effect upon the Indians—hence his move in the matter. The following year the Treaties were instituted, and from then on until 1883 or 1884 things were quiet in that district.

A story at odds with the truth is to the effect that it was in the surcharged atmosphere of '69-'70 that Gabriel became "thick" with Riel. I cannot positively deny this, but I have grave doubts. During my sojourn with the Plain-Hunters, I never once heard Dumont speak Riel's name. I often spoke of the rebel leader with Louis Marion, a Métis from St. Boniface, who was with us in the summer and winter of '72-73, but never heard Dumont mention Riel, nor did I ever hear him give voice to the revolutionary aspirations with which he has been credited.

When, in 1884, the Métis were exasperated beyond endurance with the dilly-dally tactics of the authorities at Ottawa, and a delegation of these half-breeds, composed of James Isbister, Gabriel Dumont, Michel Dumas and Moise Quелlette, went over to St. Peter's Mission, in Montana, where Riel was teaching school, and asked him to return,—the fact is that Riel barely knew Dumont. Gabriel swore solemnly before witnesses that the following recital was true. "At the time of this interview" (in Montana, in 1884) "Riel confusedly recalled having been acquainted with Gabriel Dumont in 1869 at St. Boniface, in Manitoba".

These four half-breeds were upheld by their priest, Father André, who wrote to Riel to say: "All the world impatiently expects you. I have only this to say—Come, come quickly". The men departed for Montana on May 18th, arriving at their destination on the 4th of June, and Riel's reception of them was characteristic in its self-importance and superstition. He had been at Mass, and came in to tell them to stable their horses, and returned to his devotions. On re-entering, he received the demands sent by the Métis, and this was his reply: "As you are four, it is a good omen that you arrive on the 4th of the month. But as you come in search of a fifth—let me have till the 5th to reply". No kindly

oracle whispered to Riel the number "16", which was the date of his sad end. Nor did Dumont have any inkling of the sorrows to fall upon him after 1885—the miseries of his long flight and exile, leaving his old father, his dying wife.

But the man Gabriel—what of him? How can I, with so many incidents crowding into the forefront of memory, pick out those most eloquent of Gabriel's character?

First, he was kindly to a degree; and thoughtful for others of his Métis friends not overburdened with this world's goods—though, for the matter of that, there were none of them that had more than was good for them. To obtain a livelihood at their work, which was mainly the hunting of buffalo, one needed a good horse and a cart or two, at least. Some had two and three buffalo-runners, as they called their fast saddle-ponies, and as many as ten or a dozen carts with as many cart-horses. This was their real stock-in-trade. But there were some who had no runners—only a cart or two; and a few who hadn't even a cart or a horse—men who hired out for the season or the year to their more fortunate companions. Such a one was Isidore C. . . . ., who, with his wife, worked for Gabriel.

While en route to the hunting-grounds, Isidore's wife was taken sick one day, and that afternoon gave birth to a baby. We made camp at noon. Gabriel rode out to where the horses were feeding, picked out a fairly good cart-horse from his own lot, threw the rope over it, brought it into camp, hooked it to a cart, and presented it to Isidore for his wife. That was a thoughtful and kindly act; but Gabriel had a tender heart for children—though he and his wife Magdeleine had none of their own. Later on he killed enough buffalo to fill the cart with dried meat and pemmican, and gave it to them. However, the killing of buffalo and giving them to his less fortunate companions was a common kindness of Gabriel's. I've seen him in one day kill as many as eight buffalo, and not take one for himself, but give them to those who had no fast runners.

When we returned from the building of the road to Green Lake for the Hudson's Bay Company in the spring of '73, I saw Gabriel, when we were paid off, fill a couple of small sacks with groceries and pork, and hand them to Father André, who was at Fort Carleton that day, for distribution among a few old Métis women who had been left at home at the Mission of St. Laurent, the rest of the population having gone to the hunting-grounds. It was such acts as these that endeared him to the half-breeds of that section.

He was a man of unquestioned courage, whose word was heeded at the council board above that of all others, some of whom were many years his senior. In fact, Gabriel's father and uncle—both men advanced in years, and with a wide knowledge of prairie life—deferred to Gabriel's judgment. But that courage of Gabriel is the one point on which his friends and his enemies agree. It seems to have been recognized even in early childhood. He was the fourth in a family of eleven, and one day he was busy with an older brother driving away mosquitoes with smoke. Suddenly there was a great noise, and Gabriel thought it was the Sioux. He rushed to his father and asked for a little gun. The noise was a false alarm, buffaloes accounted for it; but for his bravery his Uncle Fisher made him a present of his first gun. His historian credits him, in his first real engagement, with "un sangfroid merveilleux"; and at the early age of 25 he was chosen Chief.

It was Gabriel who tried to enforce the Law of the Plains, as it was called. I once saw some young Indian boys, 16 to 20 years of age, ride into a large herd of buffalo, with no gun or weapon, and lash the beasts. This was against the rules—and they called a council that very evening. I remember it well, and how vehement Gabriel Dumont was in denouncing this conduct, and threatening vengeance if it was repeated. Indeed, he got into trouble later for attempting to enforce this law; he assaulted another Métis and an Indian for an infringement thereof, and a warrant was sworn out for his arrest, but never executed.

It was Gabriel who handed out advice to comrades in danger. When I was threatened by the male relatives of a Blackfoot squaw who rued a trade she had made with me, it was to Gabriel I turned in perplexity; and Gabriel's rifle that came in handily for self-protection, when my own had been commandeered. The half-breed leader was always kind to me. During hunting-days, I picked up a good deal of French and Cree—and Dumont's band always called me "Le Petit Canada". The Dumonts themselves—the family connection—accorded me the status of a relative. To them I was not "Le Petit Canada", I was "Cousin", "Neveu",—and to Gabriel, always "Mon frère".

It was Gabriel whose steady nerves stood him in good stead when the crude surgery of the plains had to be called into service for man or beast. One day we were running buffalo, and one of the Cree Indians, who used a very faulty type of gun, sustained an accident. The gun exploded, smashing his fingers badly. His hand was a sight! As usual, when there was trouble, Dumont was sent for. After examining the hand, Gabriel told the Indian

his fingers would have to come off. "All right," agreed Mr. Redman, "take them off!" Thereupon, a couple of swift strokes of Gabriel's knife—and the job was done! Dumont bound up the hand, tying a piece of sinew around the wrist; and I heard that the wounds healed up in fine style. I myself have gone with Gabriel to succour sick Indians who sent for him. And even my own ills were the subject of his care. Once I had that most painful affliction, a blind boil, and he carefully lanced it.

Need one say that he was "a crack shot"? I have just come across a cutting which says: "His rifle was off the instant it touched his shoulder. I have never seen anyone quicker with a fowling-piece than he was with the rifle. I can readily understand how formidable he would be in a skirmish; to show an ear or a finger would mean being hit." I myself saw him put a bullet right through the head of a duck as it paddled near the rushes in a little lake, at a distance of not less than 100 yards—which is indeed a remarkable shot. He had said to me: "I'll take the head off that duck," and he did. From the age of ten, he was noted as a strong bowman. Later he excelled in horsemanship, and in taming wild horses; and as a young boy, he could swim all day without fatigue.

His ingenuity in solving bad situations resulted in our making a thrilling crossing of the swollen river, one icy day. And he was able to employ a queer trick that has been traced back to older generations of Plain-Hunters. He could call the buffalo in some mysterious manner, as some sportsmen call the moose to where they are lying hidden. It was a most impressive sight, and resulted in our taking a dozen or so of the animals, though I myself got nothing. It was a hilly section, and the horse I was riding—a stumbler—got into a hollow that was full of what they called Kings' Heads, *Têtes des Rois*. I was fortunate to come out alive.

Of course Gabriel had his faults. When in his cups, he was not a man to be trifled with, and was given a wide berth by those who knew him. Fortunately, his chances for indulging were not numerous. Tales of his violence when crossed (or more especially, "double-crossed"!) are fearsome indeed. Then, he was an inveterate gambler, would gamble sometimes for three days on end, stopping only to eat. When fortune went against him—and that was quite often—he was a good loser.

Let me sum up the character of this old friend of mine. Gabriel Dumont was blessed with strong intelligence, was courteous, kind, courageous, an A.I. hunter, with a thorough knowledge of plains lore and the habits of the buffalo; very ingenious, a man of

strong likes and dislikes—but in no sense the bloodthirsty wretch that he has been painted. Taken on the whole—a man to tie to in the ordinary—or in a pinch.

From another point of view, he was a remarkable Métis who, with just treatment, might have become one of the most loyal citizens of Canada. He was a true red man, extravagant, improvident; but his good qualities far outweighed his bad, and he was a man whom many leading white men were glad to call friend. The late Sir Sam Steele, knowing my early associations, got me to write an estimate of Dumont for his book, "Forty Years in Canada."

As for those of his own blood, one might travel the plains from end to end, and never hear an unkind word said of Gabriel.

Yes, the first time I ever laid eyes on Gabriel was at the "Crossing", when Louis Marion passed a keg of brandy to Gabriel to sample; and the last time I saw him was four years later, when I handed him a keg of Hudson's Bay Company rum—and both times Gabriel did full justice to the offering. The half-breed or Indian that refused a drink was a rare bird!

Well, I never met Dumont again after that meeting at Fort Carlton in '76; nor did I hear much of him till the uprising of 1885. Right well I remember reading of his escape after the capture of Riel, and remarking to a friend:

"They'll never catch Gabriel; for he knows the prairies as a sheep knows its heath, and could go anywhere blind-folded."