

## THE FORT MCKAY MÉTIS NATION: A COMMUNITY HISTORY

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ISBN 978-1-77385-593-6

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# Introduction: Steps Toward a Fort McKay Métis Community History

“What am I getting myself into?” was my thought as I sat outside of the Fort McKay Industrial Relations Corporation (IRC) office, twenty minutes early for my first day on the job in March 2009. I had taken on a new position as “Métis Liaison.” My role was meant to improve Métis participation in the corporation, representing Fort McKay’s collective interactions with governments and the multibillion-dollar oil sands companies launching the latest phase of massive industrial projects. Formed in 1998, the IRC was initially owned equally by the Fort McKay Métis and Fort McKay First Nation, but by the mid-2000s, the Métis governing body had run into trouble. Fort McKay Métis Local 122 had folded, and a new organization, Métis Local 63, had been organized to represent the Métis community’s interests, though their ownership of the IRC was not renewed. While Métis Locals were affiliate organizations of the Métis Nation of Alberta, they were independent bodies within their communities and looked after their own affairs. By the time I had arrived, the new Local had virtually no money, no community-owned businesses, and was only hanging onto its assets based upon the strength of the community’s leadership and limited support provided by the Fort McKay First Nation.

While the Fort McKay Métis struggled to reconstitute their representative organization, the First Nation had benefited from recent successes. Fort McKay First Nation concluded its treaty land entitlement in 1995, which provided a significant influx of money and land.<sup>1</sup> It was able to leverage the new federal and provincial regulatory requirements based on the ever-evolving “duty to consult” case law to sign a series of impact benefit agreements and business contracts with local industries. The agreements and business arrangements proved highly lucrative, providing the First Nation access to

money and resources that community members would have only dreamed about a generation earlier. The band's administration undertook an aggressive community development program over the same period and was able to provide members with new houses and community infrastructure, including a hockey arena, daycare, and Elders' centre. By the early 2010s, the First Nation boasted that only 7 percent of its funding came from the federal government, with the rest coming from their impact benefit agreements and successful business ventures.<sup>2</sup>

In my new role in the IRC, I was expected to support the Métis leaders as they sought to rebuild their administrative capacity so they could take advantage of the opportunities that were, at long last, beginning to present themselves in the community. In the position, I was quick to learn about the important relationship between the Fort McKay First Nation and the Fort McKay Métis — and quick to learn that the colonial legal division between the two entities was not based on the community's history and extensive kinship relations. At the time, the IRC was wholly funded through agreements with the area's industrial developers and the provincial government, which — through its recently completed and misnamed "Aboriginal" consultation policy — had committed itself to ensuring that First Nations potentially impacted by resource extraction projects could participate in regulatory processes and be meaningfully consulted. The policy was not "Aboriginal" in the sense that it provided no direction for how industrial developers should consult with Métis communities (although a limited number did).<sup>3</sup> Yet Fort McKay First Nation used its funds to represent the interests of the First Nation and Métis in the community, showcasing a commitment to a single Indigenous entity and resisting government definitions of difference.

Perhaps inevitably, by 2009, the growing economic imbalance between the two sides of the community led to tension in Fort McKay. This tension was exacerbated by the fact that key members of the band's administration did not fully understand the historic nature of the relationship between Métis and First Nation members in Fort McKay, which stretched back to the founding of the community in the mid-nineteenth century. Increasingly, the First Nation's administrators encouraged the Chief and Council to work independently of the Métis to maximize the leverage offered by the government, which strongly encouraged the region's industrial developers to consult and negotiate with First Nations but not with Métis. The administrators believed their constituents were the members of the Fort McKay First Nation and that the

lack of clarity in terms of government policy regarding Métis communities was not their problem. However, the First Nation's Chief and Council understood the importance of the relationship and pushed back against such advice. They wanted to maintain a close and supportive relationship with the Fort McKay Métis. In fact, almost all members of the Band Council were legally Métis themselves before the creation of Bill C-31 or were connected through kinship, marriage, or friendship. Through what they termed the Moose Lake Accord, the First Nation agreed to provide the new Métis organization with start-up funding and support while it re-established an administrative infrastructure and community-based businesses.

While I was hired to provide support to the Métis through the IRC, everyone involved quickly recognized that the needs of the Métis were more fundamental. They needed to develop new operating policies, procedures, and administrative structures that would allow for effective community governance. Within six months, I had left the IRC and moved over to the Fort McKay Métis administration full-time, reporting directly to the Métis Local 63 board of directors. My initial tasks included establishing a community strategic plan, identifying and stabilizing funding sources, and (re-)establishing relationships with external stakeholders.

As with any new community administrator, I soon began to uncover the community's many challenges. As I tried to understand them, my original training as a historian led me to ask questions about how those situations had come to be. Among the first issues that confronted us were the limited harvesting rights of Fort McKay Métis members versus the comparatively open rights available to First Nations members. This difference proved to be extraordinarily difficult to comprehend. How was it that Fort McKay First Nation members could hunt virtually without restriction in the community's traditional territory while their Métis brothers and sisters-in-law, cousins, aunts, uncles, and even parents — most of whom had also lived in Fort McKay their whole life — could not? Leaders at Fort McKay watched with interest as numerous Métis harvesting rights cases wound their way through the legal system, and many long internal debates were had about how the interests of Fort McKay Métis members could be defended if they were charged for “illegal” harvesting.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately, the close connection between the Métis and First Nations community members helped to avert disaster, as more often than not, these interrelated community members would hunt and fish together. If a Fish and Wildlife officer ever asked, it was always the First Nations

member who had pulled the trigger or hooked the fish (though I often wondered whether the officers believed the Métis were such bad shots and fishers compared to their First Nations companions). It was all overwhelming at first, and I sought pragmatic “solutions,” although the overall situation remained unresolved and continued to take up space in my subconscious.

Another pressing question that emerged shortly after my appointment related to the community’s land and housing situation. Housing is an overriding issue in many Indigenous communities and one that is rarely easily solved or even understood, as the circumstances contributing to housing crises are often multilayered and complex.<sup>5</sup> In Fort McKay, the situation was no different. Many houses on the Métis side of the community had fallen into disrepair and were often overcrowded, leading to health concerns.<sup>6</sup> No one seemed to know how the situation had come to pass. As I began to review the issue, my initial question was, “Who owned the houses?” Perhaps foolishly, I thought the question would lead to a simple response, but a simple response was not forthcoming. As it turned out, the Métis houses were on land leased from the provincial government and renewed every five years. The Métis had lived in “their” houses, in some cases for over twenty years, without paperwork in the form of subleases or rental agreements to support their claims. As a result, most occupants did not pay rent, often leaving the “community” responsible for paying the government land taxes and other costs associated with the lease. The bankrupted Métis Local 122 had failed to keep up with these payments, and the relatively new Métis Local 63 was now suddenly responsible. While I appreciated that there was obviously a long history regarding the land, the administrative crisis had to be my focus. We started the difficult process of developing the policies and procedures necessary to manage a land base effectively, which ultimately led to the purchase of the land from the government approximately ten years later, in 2018.<sup>7</sup>

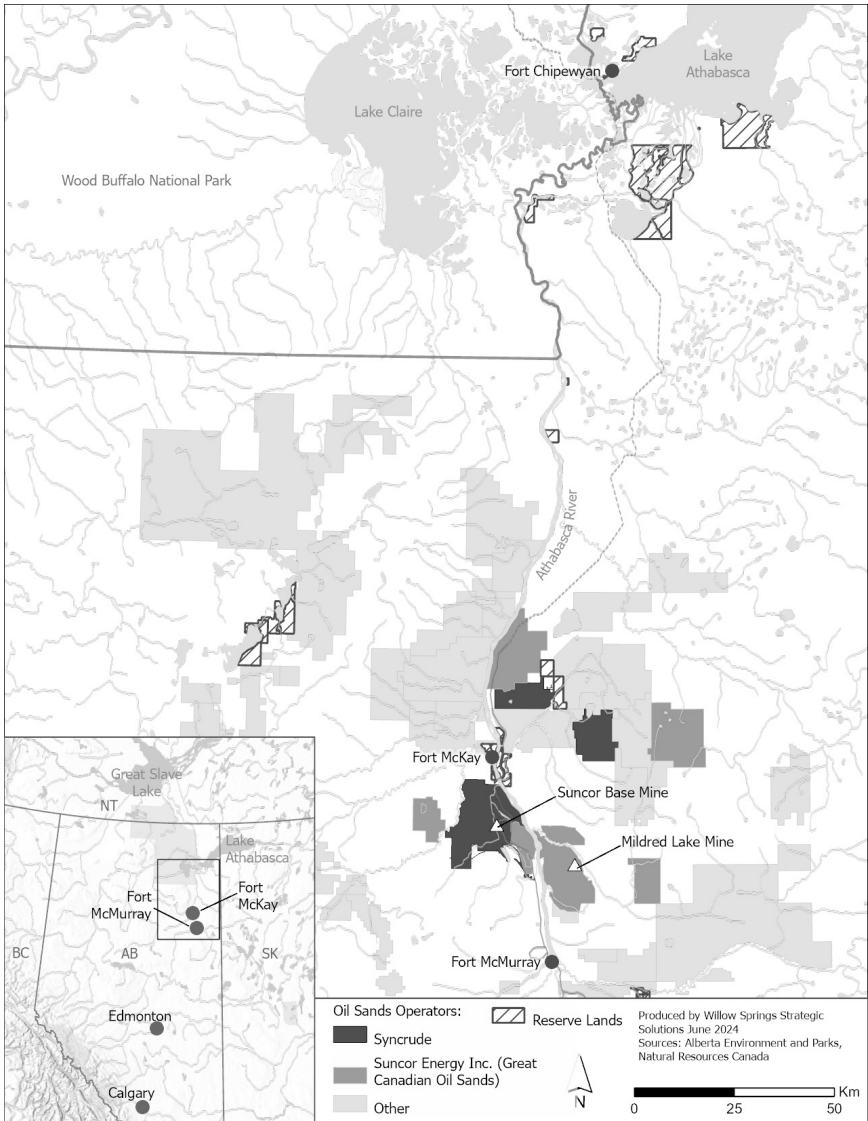
Understandably, given the challenges outlined above, Métis community members increasingly began transferring their membership to the First Nation. This was prompted by ongoing changes to the Indian Act, starting with Bill C-31 in the mid-1980s, which allowed individuals (particularly women) who had lost their status through marriage to claim back membership in the First Nation. Over the next thirty years, disenfranchised First Nations people continued to challenge the misogynistic and racist policies enshrined in the Indian Act, allowing generations of people to qualify or requalify for their status.<sup>8</sup> In Fort McKay, the better access to housing for First Nation members,

coupled with per capita distributions from their growing community-owned businesses, proved enticing for many Fort McKay Métis members who had neither secure land tenure nor financial independence. By 2009, the community's population — which was once estimated to be approximately 50 percent Métis and 50 percent First Nation — had transformed. The First Nation now comprised over 80 percent of the community's population.

Finally, in my new administrative position, I maintained the connection with the Fort McKay IRC, which was reconstituted as the Fort McKay Sustainability Department in 2011. That meant I would become intimately involved in various negotiations and managing agreements with industrial developers in partnership with the Fort McKay First Nation. This role required me to become conversant in the language and to gain at least a rudimentary understanding of the community's history related to industrial expansion, which often left me with more questions than answers. Through reviewing historic agreements and related documents, I started to see the Fort McKay leadership's long-standing vision of a single, united community. However, the agreements provided few clues as to why that vision had yet to be realized.

While the Métis leaders recognized the need to record and understand their history — a task that even became a core pillar of their 2009 strategic plan — the pressing needs of the day occupied most of my time. Over two years, we focused on stabilizing the Métis community. We laid the groundwork for a reformulated social enterprise to help finance the community's goals; began negotiations with the Alberta government to secure land for Métis either through a long-term lease or ownership; developed bylaws for a new organization that would help to modernize governance in the community and provide the tools necessary to manage land and membership; and worked to ensure the Métis' place within negotiations conducted in partnership with the First Nation and the region's developers.

By 2012, my career took a different trajectory, and I established my own consultancy. The new company allowed me to continue working for Fort McKay on strategic initiatives while also assisting other communities in the region. This shift allowed me to combine the skills I had learned as an administrator with my academic training as a historian helping Indigenous communities guard themselves against the challenges of massive industrial development and constantly evolving government policies. Along with my colleagues in this new business, I wrote reports about how industry impacted Indigenous and community land use, conducted studies regarding



MAP 0.1  
Fort McKay Regional Map



homelessness, and participated in a wide range of committees and focus groups that advised government and industry about how projects might be better conceived to limit or avoid negative outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

My practice increasingly involved legal questions regarding consultation and how it should apply to Métis communities. I began researching historical and contemporary issues that Fort McKay Métis and other northern Alberta Métis had to deal with after the *Powley* decision and Alberta's development of its "credible assertion" policy.<sup>10</sup> It was this process that eventually led to this book.

As Métis groups in northeastern Alberta became more organized, they requested that government and industrial developers consult with their organizations in the same way they engaged with the region's First Nations. First Nations had benefited from a consultation policy that involved capacity funding and increasingly led to negotiated long-term impact benefit agreements. However, the Métis requests were often met with silence, obstruction, and a general unwillingness to cooperate. I would joke with my Métis clients that it felt like we were characters in our own dystopian Kafkaesque novel, where we didn't even know the rules of the processes we were being asked to undertake. Frustrated, two Métis groups — Fort McMurray and Fort Chipewyan Métis — brought the issue of Métis consultation forward in the courts.

The *R. v. Powley* (2003) decision had opened a new playing field, and the landmark Métis-rights case affirmed that Métis harvesting rights are protected under section 35(1) of the Constitution Act, 1982. Perhaps most importantly, the *Powley* case established ten criteria, known as the Powley test, by which Métis rights and those eligible to exercise them can be determined. While the extent and the ability of a court to determine what is and is not a "Métis community" or a "Métis person" has been called into question, particularly in academic circles,<sup>11</sup> the decision laid out the basic tenets of what legally defined a Métis community, most notably whether the community has historic roots in a specific geographic location, whether community members self-identify as members of that "Métis community," and whether the community accepts and can represent those members.<sup>12</sup> The line of argumentation adopted by the government in *Fort Chipewyan v. Alberta Government* and *Fort McMurray v. Alberta Government* followed the *Powley* decision and questioned whether either group had the authority to represent the Métis rights-holders in the communities.



In both cases, the Crown argued that it was reasonable for Alberta *not* to require consultation with either the Fort McMurray or Fort Chipewyan Métis because neither group had provided the government information about who they represent, nor did they establish “any authority to act, and cannot demonstrate in any objectively verifiable manner that its members can establish Métis identity for the purpose of claiming section 35 rights.”<sup>13</sup> The issue in both cases turned on whether the government owed a duty to consult to Métis groups in Fort McMurray and Fort Chipewyan and what Métis had to do to be recognized as rights holders for consultation purposes. While the cases were linked by the court, the facts in each were different. In *Fort McMurray*, the court found that the government had not fully considered the evidence provided by the community and, therefore, overturned the decisions and forced the government to reconsider whether Fort McMurray Métis were an affected party. In the *Fort Chipewyan* case, as outlined by Moira Lavoie, “the court set out two requirements for Métis organizations seeking to enforce the duty to consult under the Haida test, but whose governance structures are not statutorily recognized by the Crown. First, the organization must provide credible evidence that the organization’s members meet the requirements of the Powley test for Métis identification. Second, the organization must provide credible evidence of its representative authority to enforce the duty to consult.”<sup>14</sup>

Upon reviewing the *Fort Chipewyan* decision, while the Fort McKay Métis were confident in their own identity and authority to represent themselves, they were worried they did not have the evidence to communicate this effectively in a legal proceeding. Specifically, they understood they needed to explicitly define their own membership and ensure that membership authorized the local leadership to represent them and clearly demonstrate, through genealogy and history, that the contemporary membership was connected to the historic Fort McKay Métis community that held section 35 rights. Specifically, they were worried that if the provincial government did not recognize the authority of individual communities to represent themselves, there was the possibility that even more companies might refuse to consult with them or, even worse, that companies with existing agreements might rip them up until proof of representation was provided. The court made clear that Métis communities had to provide detailed information about whom they represent, establish authority to act on behalf of those people, and show that their constituents hold section 35 rights.<sup>15</sup> While many question whether

*Fort Chipewyan v. Alberta Government* fundamentally alters the consultation tests set down by the Supreme Court, the decision sent shockwaves throughout Alberta. Métis communities throughout the province considered how they should respond.

Though the Fort McKay Métis recognized they had the resources internally to deal with questions of membership, they knew they also required a community history to validate community knowledge. In the end, they decided they needed at least two expert reports, one detailing the Métis genealogy of the community and a second about Fort McKay Métis' historical development. In 2017, I conducted the historical study, and Laura Hanowski completed the supporting genealogical study.

The project provided a unique opportunity to revisit many of the questions that had originally occurred to me when I had been an employee. The community wanted the report to be prepared independently and without interference to ensure it could be relied upon in court. The parameters provided to me were broad, with the research questions following *Powley*: "Was there a historic Métis community in Fort McKay? And if so, how did that community develop and change over time?" In addition, Fort McKay wanted me to explore the question: "If historic and contemporary Métis communities exist in Fort McKay, how are they connected to one another?" I was asked to complete original research that included archival and primary materials and information already amassed by the community, such as interviews conducted during other projects, their cultural impact assessment, and traditional land-use studies. Though I worked independently, community members reviewed and verified my findings.

After the final reports were submitted, they were used as part of a larger submission that concluded with the recognition of "credible assertion" by the provincial government.<sup>16</sup> This meant that the government acknowledged that it had a duty to consult with the Fort McKay Métis in appropriate situations. Meanwhile, my conversations with the Métis leaders and administrators regarding the project continued. We both saw an opportunity to contribute to a broader conversation regarding the history of Indigenous people in the region and how government and industrial incursions have shaped the development of communities throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Those conversations would eventually lead to the genesis of this book.

In the process of completing the project on behalf of Fort McKay, a few key themes began to emerge. First, the sources confirmed one of the first

observations I had made as an employee, that there was a clear and demonstrable interconnectedness between the Fort McKay First Nation and Fort McKay Métis that underlies the whole of the community's history and confounds attempts to place the community's "Métis" population within a tidy *Powley* narrative. Similarly, the Fort McKay Métis history also misaligns with national Métis narratives, which propose a singular nation with close ties throughout the "Métis homeland" with demonstrable evidence of shared "spirituality, history, territory, values, traditions, laws, language, music, dance, art, customs, practices, and institutions."<sup>17</sup> Such narratives are predicated on establishing separate and discrete First Nations and Métis groups, which would erase the realities of the connectedness that existed between Indigenous communities like Fort McKay in the time before treaty and that still persist today.<sup>18</sup> The Fort McKay Métis Nation (FMMN) research aligned with that of other established scholars, including Heather Devine, Nicole St.-Onge, Arthur Ray and Kenichi Matsui, Neil Reddekopp, and Patricia McCormack (amongst others). Collectively, they show that in the nineteenth century, a robust society built around the fur trade had developed in Athabasca country that included many ancestors of the people whose descendants would later become Fort McKay First Nation and Fort McKay Métis members. The historic interconnections of these members have been maintained and, in some cases, strengthened into the "modern" era of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>19</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, as the Treaty 8 Commission, followed by the Half-Breed Scrip Commission, travelled through Fort McKay and other communities in what became northern Alberta, these families divided themselves into two segments by opting for either "treaty" or "Half-breed scrip." Yet it is doubtful that their decisions hinged upon allegiance to a unique First Nation or Métis identity and heritage. Even the accounts of the treaty party pointed to the general lack of cultural differences and distinctive identities.<sup>20</sup> More often, people living in the Fort McKay region, like many people in northeastern Alberta, decided to enter into treaty or apply for "Half-breed" (Métis) scrip based on their individual — and presumably more pragmatic — concerns.<sup>21</sup> This historic pragmatism has continued to the present day when members of the broader Fort McKay community continue to make economically informed choices about their "status." Kinship ties among community members have strengthened over time as First Nation and Métis community members continue to marry one another and work

together to build Fort McKay throughout the modern period. That means it is virtually impossible to disentangle the First Nations and Métis history throughout the study. While the book purports to be a Fort McKay Métis history, much of it actually tells the history of the larger community as a whole in an attempt to avoid arbitrary “obsolete statutory distinctions” that might distort or ignore the community’s interconnectedness. Far from being enveloped by a pan-Métis identity, the Métis of Fort McKay are better understood as part of a unique Fort McKay *Indigenous* community — one that belies the significance of ethnic division into “First Nation” and “Métis.” The collective Fort McKay community existed and was self-governing long before the Canadian and Albertan governments established control in the region, and that unity still exists today.<sup>22</sup>

A related theme that I had observed as an administrator and that emerged more clearly during the research was the importance of the land, both at Fort McKay itself and in the surrounding region, or “environs,” as many of the Métis court cases describe the lands traditionally used by the Métis. The processes by which lands were and are used, managed, and defended provide a key to understanding the community’s evolution since the 1960s. The following chapters will show how the struggle over control of the land provided the community its *raison d’être* and helped to forge its identity, ultimately laying the groundwork for the community’s prosperity in the modern era. In this sense, the research provides further insight into the creation of what Ian McKay has called the “liberal-order framework” that has come to be known as Canada. Specifically, through undertaking a detailed local history of Fort McKay, we come to learn a little about how Canada is, in fact, better understood as a “project of rule, rather than either an essence we must defend or an empty homogenous space we must possess.”<sup>23</sup> The localized history of the community provides a lens through which we can see how Canada’s expanded “liberal dominion” moved into the region, supplanting the “aliberal entities” such as Fort McKay, whose “alternative logics” challenged the liberal order and forced governments to forcefully put down alternative ways of knowing, organizing, and managing territories.<sup>24</sup>

For example, by studying the processes that took control of the land away from the Fort McKay people, they transferred it first to the federal and provincial governments and later to the massive industrial developers who promised those governments that they would make previously “unproductive” land “productive.” For this question, the concept of “settler colonialism” is helpful,

especially its assertion that this form of colonialism involved “eliminating the Native.” However, the concept is far from perfect for describing what happened in Fort McKay, particularly as Indigenous land was not privatized, but rather set aside as “Crown Land” to be leased to multinational companies (often with significant national ownership) specializing in oil sands extraction.<sup>25</sup> As such, and as will be shown below, the situation in Fort McKay is perhaps better understood as “extractivism” where companies, empowered by policies approved by provincial and federal governments, were able to take control of Indigenous land, often damaging it beyond repair.<sup>26</sup> Through this process, governments repeatedly minimized the importance of Fort McKay community members’ use of the land, while at the same time downplaying the massive impacts that industrial resource expansion had on community’s health and development.

Another area to which this research contributes is through the use of genealogy and the construction of an Indigenous community’s interconnections. In recent years, Métis history has come to be intertwined with the study of genealogies, primarily traced through governmental scrip records, which often allow scholars to see the scrip takers family interconnection at least one generation forward and back.<sup>27</sup> Genealogies are the specific evidence of kinship, showing how families are constituted and connected to one another over time. While the methods pioneered by the likes of Heather Devine and Brenda Macdougall have undoubtedly made an important contribution to the field, they also have limitations that can contribute to a misrepresentation of Métis history. The first challenge with a genealogical approach that uses scrip records as their primary form of evidence is that this research typically ends in the nineteenth century and remains virtually silent as to what happens to Métis communities in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. If, following the detailed research of Ens and Sawchuk, many Indigenous communities were transformed to become “Métis” following the somewhat arbitrary ascription of the 1899 Treaty and Scrip commissions, then twentieth-century history is as, if not more, important to determining the existence of a Métis community than the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> As will be shown, it was over this period of roughly one hundred years that the Fort McKay Métis were forged and came to create their own Nation.

A second challenge that researchers focused on Métis scrip records can encounter is failing to recognize the interconnectivity that existed in northern Indigenous communities in the nineteenth century and continued into

the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As pointed out by scholars such as Robert Alexander Innes, nationalist histories are prone to finding connections that may not actually exist.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, such approaches tend to minimize the impact of government policies on localized communities, which enshrined the creation of distinct “Métis” and “Treaty” populations. However, these distinctions were often little more than a colonial fiction, as evidenced in Fort McKay’s genealogy, where connections between Fort McKay First Nation and Métis members remained strong. Furthermore, the close kinship interconnections among the local Indigenous population provided Fort McKay with its cultural identity and helped its members organize their response as a community to governmental and industrial incursions on their traditional territory, especially in the 1960s and later.

The first chapters focus primarily on the community’s early history and its network of genealogies. The genealogical analysis shows how the community was organized through interlocking kinship networks and how those networks persisted through time. It builds upon the work used in the Fort McKay Métis Nation’s credible assertion package.

While kinship provides one source of evidence to understand the community’s identity, their relationship to the environment, their shared land-use practices, and the fur trade economy provide an important second. The third chapter will examine this period, exploring the community’s connection to the “bush economy.” Those practicing the bush economy were able, over a long period (in the case of Fort McKay from roughly 1850 to 1970), to successfully integrate the trapping of small fur-bearing animals into their traditional way of life. During this time, Fort McKay community members thrived as they wove the fur trade into their pre-contact ways of life on the land, utilizing a decentralized communal system for organizing and managing their land uses.<sup>30</sup> Their way of life remained without serious challenge until the mid-twentieth century, when a series of changes to how the government managed land in northern Alberta began to take hold. Of critical importance was a new provincial policy for trapping, whereby the government implemented a system that forced community members to take individual “traplines,” today known as “registered fur management areas.” Indigenous people resisted this policy, aided by federal Indian Affairs officials, which allowed Fort McKay families some success. However, the 1960s presented new challenges, when the government sought to “professionalize” trapping and encouraged trappers

to focus on the pursuit more as a commercial activity and less as a cultural endeavor or part of a way of life.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, the waves of industrial activities — all afforded priority over Indigenous bush-based economies — left little room for the community to maneuver. Like many governments in the post–Second World War era, the Alberta government had a vision that “high modernism” would uplift the world into a prosperous new future. As defined by James C. Scott, high modernism was “a strong, one might even say muscle-bound version of the self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws.”<sup>32</sup> In the province of Alberta, high modernism was most directly felt in the northeast, where governments began to see anew the possibilities offered in the Athabasca oil sands region, where billions of barrels of oil lay mixed with sand just below the surface of the forests and wetlands that Fort McKay community members depended upon for their livelihood. The federal and provincial governments invested heavily in the new ventures, providing government subsidies to pioneering companies and developing policies that would clear the way for extractivism, a new form of settler colonialism that focuses on:

acquiring territory, eliminating (or containing) Indigenous presence, and controlling land and resources. In short, extreme extraction can be a product of and an agent of these settler colonial relations, which are also enmeshed in the dynamics of capitalism.<sup>33</sup>

As the government began to view the region with new eyes, Fort McKay was forced to respond, though they were ill-prepared for the undertaking. Traditional governance structures that had served the community well since the mid-nineteenth century were little match for the big words (and dollars) thrown around by oil company executives and the government that had little desire to imagine the landscape as a “homeland” in opposition to a frontier where extraction should take place.

Unfortunately, as this book will show, the “scales of justice” would rarely tip in Fort McKay’s favour from the 1960s onward, though increasingly, the community would find leaders who would learn through a mix of direct



actions and litigative process ways to push back against overwhelming odds.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, though it is undeniable that the so-called energy frontier transformed the community, it is also true that it galvanized the community to action and that the leader's responses were rooted in their desire to maintain what they still consider to be essential components of their core Indigenous identity: their connection to the land through their mixed economy and their kinship connections to one other.

These issues will be considered in more detail in the fourth and fifth chapters of this work. The fourth will look at the community's response to governmental policies surrounding land management in Fort McKay, specifically considering the strategies used by the First Nation and Métis to defend the community's needs through the Fort McKay Association. It will also look at how governmental inflexibility eventually forced a clear administrative separation between the Métis and the First Nation.<sup>35</sup>

This context will be important as the fifth chapter looks primarily at how Fort McKay responded to extractivism — the expanding industrial development of oil sands projects — that began in the 1960s. Though the entire community was forced apart in terms of land-tenure discussions, members continued to work together in other important ways, most notably in their response to the continued incursion of new oil sands projects and forestry into their homeland. In the late 1970s, the First Nation and Métis jointly intervened in the regulatory hearings without great effect, forcing the community to consider other strategies, including a road blockade and increasingly mounting legal challenges to defend their rights. Such moves forced the government and industry to commit to working collaboratively with the community as a whole. This commitment ultimately led to the establishment of the only jointly-owned Industrial Relations Corporation in the region. The Fort McKay IRC would go on to negotiate agreements for nearly twenty years to benefit the whole community. These agreements provided the capital necessary to build much of the community infrastructure still used today. These responses forged the modern community of Fort McKay, and its members have both adhered to their traditional land-based livelihoods and simultaneously attempted to influence the shape of new industries that are defining the boundaries of their future.

The study concludes with an epilogue, "From Community to Nation," that analyzes how, in the last decade or so, the Métis community of Fort McKay began explicitly on the path toward nationhood and self-government.

Over that time, the Fort McKay Métis began forcefully asserting its “nationhood” in the hope that external governments and other Indigenous organizations would recognize them like they already recognized the Fort McKay First Nation. In 2021, the Fort McKay Métis issued a “Position Paper on Consultation and Self-Government.” The text is included as an appendix in this volume. As they undertake this move, they have tried as much as possible to maintain the fluidity that was a founding feature of the community: for example, by adapting their membership codes to allow community members to move between Métis and First Nations groups based upon what the laws of the day allow; by providing equal support to all community land users who choose to continue using the land for traditional activities; by continuing to work as a whole to defend community land interests; and by working together to develop community infrastructure that will benefit Fort McKay members for generations to come. In these ways, the community of Fort McKay is attempting to re-form the unified Indigenous community that the government originally attempted to divide at the beginning of the twentieth century.

While few studies similarly consider an Indigenous community that includes both First Nations and Métis members at a micro level and carries through from the historic to the modern era, there are several that bear specific mention. Patricia McCormack’s important study of Fort Chipewyan provides one key source of comparison when she convincingly argues that, over roughly the same time period, the multiple Indigenous groups in the northern fur trade economy came to form a “complex entity with multiple ancestries and meanings” that were encompassed in several fluid subcommunities in the Athabasca region.<sup>36</sup> The work of Trudy Nicks and Kenneth Morgan is also useful as it considers how the Indigenous community of Grande Cache, which was first developed in the nineteenth century, later adapted and changed when traditional “strategies for dealing with external influences no longer served their needs.”<sup>37</sup> Fort McKay community members, like those in Fort Chipewyan or Grande Cache, did not “dwell on the question of their identity, vis-à-vis the outside world.”<sup>38</sup> In this sense, this study follows in Nicks’s and Morgan’s footsteps, tracing another Métis community’s history over the *long durée* and demonstrating how it developed and persisted through the twentieth century.

Indigenous voice is crucial, and knowledgeable community members reviewed this project at different stages. While there have been minor disagreements over the community’s memory of events and the written record,

everyone has enthusiastically supported the work to date. In addition, the project was reviewed and partially financed by the Fort McKay Métis Nation. Although it is an independent study, it has Fort McKay's blessing.

A scholar working closely with a community — particularly one who has also worked in an administrative role for the community — has the distinct advantage of unique lines of sight. For example, the family trees used in the book are those of friends and colleagues who, over a number of years, I've had the pleasure of getting to know on a deeply personal level. I could share maps of historical registered fur management areas I found in the archives with community members. In some cases, those community members then framed those maps to show their children the places where their parents and grandparents trapped before oil sands projects transformed the land. I found letters and newspaper articles that clearly connect today's community with that from earlier generations, which show community members that their ancestors fought like hell for the land where they now live.

Finally, on the topic of sources, readers will quickly be made aware that although this is a community history that had access to community members' knowledge, and I used the oral histories that had been compiled, I depended heavily on newspapers, government records, and other published materials to construct many of my arguments. As will be seen, numerous quality studies have been completed by and on the community's behalf from the 1970s through the 2000s that heavily draw on oral histories.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, in 2005, *Mihkwâkamiwi Sîpîsis: Stories and Pictures from Métis Elders in Fort McKay* was released, which compiled interviews from four Métis Elders in the community.<sup>40</sup> In these studies, community members' knowledge about their land use, land management, and ways industrial incursions were impinging on traditional ways of life were invaluable. While working for and with Fort McKay, it became clear that many of my questions regarding the dynamics and processes that shaped its development were largely outside the community's common knowledge and poorly reflected in local oral histories. Few community members understood the shifting government policies that led to changes in land tenure, trapline management, and industrial expansion. Thus, many of the findings in this history were welcomed by community members who, on more than one occasion, replied upon reading the manuscript: "I always wondered how these things came to be, now I know." By shedding light on bureaucratic histories, I hope that community members will now be in a better position to understand the external pressures that have

shaped their circumstances, as well as those of their parents and grandparents, and be better prepared to undertake community histories in the future.

Another advantage of working closely with the community was that it provided easy access to the many studies Fort McKay commissioned over the years in response to oil sands projects. As well, the existence of this collective body of works underscores how the First Nation and Métis populations in Fort McKay have so often worked together to address their many shared concerns. A number of important studies have been completed or directed by the community that provide important local voices. Probably the two most important are “From Where We Stand: Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study of the Fort McKay First Nation” (1983) and *There Is Still Survival Out There: A Traditional Land Use and Occupancy Study of the Fort McKay First Nations* (1994).<sup>41</sup> In both cases, the community either led or directed the studies and used them to defend local rights. In addition, the community has more recently produced a number of reports that directly consider the impacts of oil sands development. The most definitive work was completed in 2010 as part of a “Fort McKay Specific Assessment,” submitted as supplemental information for the Shell Jackpine Mine Expansion and Pierre River Mine project hearings.<sup>42</sup> As a product of the IRC, the assessment was completed on behalf of the whole community and built on earlier community-specific studies. It was an important achievement because it considered all the same scientific and social science disciplines typically found in an environmental impact assessment, though its audience was technical. These community-led studies, importantly, provided a detailed glimpse into Fort McKay’s changing way of life, mapping key sites of community land use and attempting to understand the human and economic costs of the changes brought by industrial development. The most recent study was Métis-specific, “Teck Frontier Mine Project: Fort McKay Métis Integrated Cultural Assessment.”<sup>43</sup> The Fort McKay Métis Sustainability Centre commissioned it for the hearing on the proposed Teck project. Similar to the Fort McKay Specific Assessment, this work was undertaken in a project-specific context and directed towards a technical audience.<sup>44</sup> While the majority of these works are “public” in the sense that they were submitted to regulatory bodies, they are often difficult to find and are rarely available in university or public libraries. One spin-off of this book project is dissemination: I am working with Fort McKay to make more of these documents publicly available for researchers—these can be accessed via the University of Calgary Press website

here: <https://ucp.manifoldapp.org/projects/9781773855936>. At the same time, I hope researchers and publishers will similarly seek out opportunities to make their work readily available to non-university affiliated researchers, particularly those who live in rural, remote, and Indigenous communities so that everyone can benefit from the knowledge that is often only available to those with formal academic affiliations.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, the community weighed in on some stylistic considerations. Members stated their preference for the term and spelling “Métis” as opposed to “Metis” or “metis” in the document. Similarly, they prefer “Fort McKay,” not “Fort MacKay,” a spelling often found in government documents. The community is working with the provincial government to standardize this spelling in all official correspondence.<sup>46</sup> In cases where these terms are used in quotations, the spellings used are those of the original documents. Finally, the terms “Indian” and “half-breed” are both common in the historical record for the Indigenous people in the region. In the text, the preferred “First Nations” and “Métis” are used unless “Indian” and “half-breed” is used in a quotation.

