

James McKay, M.L.A. (1825-1879)

James McKay, born at Fort Edmonton, was the son of James McKay Sr.¹ (an itinerant Scottish fur trader) and Marguerite Gladu², a Métisse daughter of Charles Gladu and Marguerite Ross. He spent most of his life in what is now Manitoba. McKay was an expert guide, woodsman and hunter.

James McKay was educated at Red River and began working for the Hudson's Bay Company in 1853 and had postings in the Swan River district, Qu'Appelle Lakes, Fort Ellice, Fort Pelly and the Shayenne River region. McKay began work with the HBC in 1853. It is a tribute to his skills that many distinguished visitors sought him out as a guide. He often met the HBC governor, George Simpson in Crow Wing, Minnesota and escorted him to Fort Garry. In 1857, while at Fort Ellice, he was engaged to guide the John Palliser party from Fort Ellice (now St. Lazare, Manitoba) through the Saskatchewan plains to its winter quarters at Fort Carlton, Saskatchewan.

He married Margaret Rowand in June of 1859 and as a result of his wife's inheritance, the family established itself at Deer Lodge and McKay had an active business career at Red River.

He built the famous Deer Lodge Mansion as his home on the banks of the Assiniboine River. He owned thousands of acres of land and at one time had a stable of horses valued at more than \$100,000.

A huge man of 340 pounds, McKay was impressive in every way. His strength was legendary. Once while riding on the plains he was attacked by a prairie grizzly bear, a species, which preyed on the bison herds and is now extinct. He responded by lassoing the bear and subduing it. On another occasion, he came across a couple in a horse drawn cart stuck in the mud. McKay unhitched the horse, put himself between the shafts and pulled the vehicle out. As a member of the Palliser expedition, he is said to have ridden a bison. He was so physically agile that he was able to leap over the back of his horse. He was also considered a champion dancer of the "Red River Jig," a dance requiring both grace and agility. The Earl of Southesk, supplies a full description of James McKay as he appeared on their trip from Crow Wing (Minnesota Territory) to Upper Fort Garry:

[He was] immensely broad-chested and muscular, though not tall, he weighed eighteen stone; yet in spite of his stoutness he was exceedingly hardy and active, and a wonderful horseman. His face—somewhat Assyrian in type—is very handsome: short delicate aquiline nose; piercing dark grey eyes; long dark-brown hair, beard, moustaches; white small, regular teeth; skin tanned to red bronze from exposure to weather. He was



¹ James McKay Sr, Was born January 13, 1797 in Scotland, he died in 1887 at Prince Albert and is buried on the Mistawasis Reserve.

² Marguerite was born in 1809 at Cumberland House

dressed in Red River style—a blue cloth “Capot” (hooded frock-coat) with brass buttons; red and black flannel shirt, which served also as a waistcoat; black belt around the waist; buff leather moccasins on his feet; trousers of brown and white striped home-made woollen stuff. (*Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountains: A Diary*. Edinburgh: Edmonton and Douglas, 1875)

McKay deserves a special place in history for preserving the bison. He realized they were becoming scarce and after capturing some calves began raising a herd at Deer Lodge. He later split this herd and sold some to Donald A. Smith. Portions of his herd were used to stock Assiniboine Park and Banff National Park.

Because of his facility with the French, English, Cree, Ojibway, and Dakota languages, McKay played an active role in the western treaty making process and was involved in the negotiations of Treaties I to IV. He was president of the Executive Council of the Manitoba government and later became Speaker of the Upper Chamber of the Manitoba provincial legislature. In 1874 he was appointed to the North West Council.

McKay opposed Louis Riel and the other Métis resisters in 1869-70. He chose to leave the community for a short time to avoid the controversy. He was a brother to Angus McKay who was also active in the political unrest of the time. Angus was opposed to Louis Riel’s methods for dealing with the Canadian government and he was arrested by Riel in March 1870. Later that year, he was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba in the riding of Lake Manitoba and was reelected in 1874. McKay resigned in 1876; his brother James was elected to the seat by acclamation in 1877. James died on December 2, 1879

References

- Turner, Allen R. “James McKay.” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. X (1871-1880). Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972: 473-474.
- D. Bruce Sealey and Antoine S. Lussier. *The Métis: Canada's Forgotten People*. Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1975: 101-102.



LOUIS RIEL INSTITUTE
Knowledge • Culture • Heritage

Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Métis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute