

Halfbreed: Maria Campbell [C1]

La scrittrice e regista métis parla delle sue memorie, pubblicate cinquant'anni fa, nonché delle conseguenze del colonialismo e della discriminazione delle popolazioni indigene. Un'opera centrale della letteratura americana.

Born in a rural area in Saskatchewan, Canada, Maria Campbell is an Indigenous Métis elder, teacher, writer and filmmaker. Now eighty-four years old, her memoir [Halfbreed](#) (1973) is regarded as a foundational piece of Indigenous literature. Published when she was in her early 30s, it describes the discrimination, oppression and poverty that Indigenous and Métis people experience.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Around 4.9 per cent of Canadians identify as Indigenous. They [belong](#) to three main peoples: First Nations, Inuit or Métis. The name Métis derives from the 1700s, when French and Scottish [fur traders](#) married Indigenous women. Their descendants were called 'half-breeds', but the term is both [derogatory](#) and [inaccurate](#), says Campbell, as the Métis formed their own distinct nation and collective culture.

THE STRUGGLE

In her memoir, Campbell describes how Métis leaders were [hanged](#), imprisoned or exiled after two armed resistances in the 1800s. In the 1890s, Métis life was [disrupted](#) again by waves of new [settlers](#). Some Métis were forced to assimilate, while others were displaced. Many suffered [hardship](#) broken families, [land theft](#) and addiction, as well as racism and gender violence. Many lost their identity, oppressed by a colonial system that used religious education as a controlling force. But according to Campbell, her book is also a celebration of the Métis culture. It introduces some vibrant characters: her overwhelmed but resolute father, her seven [siblings](#), and her

great-grandmother Cheechum, whose [down-to-earth wisdom](#) is a [life-affirming](#) force in the book.

PLAINS AND CITIES

Today, half of the Métis live in urban areas and half on the plains in the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. But there, they are “[landless](#) in their homeland”, says Campbell. Throughout the 20th century, land [granted](#) to them by the government was confiscated, or purchased at prices well below its [worth](#) by new [settlers](#). To find out more, Speak Up attended a conference given by Campbell. As she explained, today, Indigenous land [claims](#) are common in Canada, but despite decades of negotiation, there have been no [settlements](#) that recognise the right to lands traditionally used and occupied by the Métis. **Maria Campbell (Canadian accent):** Our history is one of struggle to retain our homeland and after two armed resistances with the Canadian government and our leaders being [hanged](#), imprisoned and exiled we were shamed, pushed into the past, made invisible and forgotten. We [rose](#) again and after decades of negotiations, our leaders were able to have us recognized and included in the Canadian constitution as one of the three Aboriginal peoples of Canada. But this didn’t mean that anything [changed](#) for us. We’re still a [landless](#) people in our homeland, but like other Indigenous peoples in Canada we have the highest poverty [rates](#), the highest prison [rates](#) for both men and women, the highest suicide [rates](#) of most of our young people under the age of thirty all the way down to the age of ten, and the highest [rates](#) of [homelessness](#). **A COLONIAL PATRIARCHY** Recently, Campbell’s book was republished after the discovery of pages cut from the original [draft](#). They describe her [rape](#) as a teenager by a member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The absence of these pages shows how Indigenous women in society are made “invisible”, says Campbell. As she explains, this is contrary to Indigenous custom, and better reflects the way women were treated in Europe. **Maria Campbell:** Most of our people fight for our personal and our people’s inherent rights and liberties. We have always protected our families, our land and water, our languages and culture and we have always [nurtured](#) and continued to nurture liberation for our people. That’s a role

that women have always played. If it wasn't for that, we would probably have no language and no culture left.

A NEW EPIDEMIC

Rural living offers little opportunity for the Métis, while urbanisation brings new problems, says Campbell. **Maria Campbell:** Homelessness is something that was never a part of our culture. Landlessness yes, we didn't have a place that we could stay very long. But [homelessness](#), as long as there were people around, nobody was ever homeless. And so [homelessness](#) is probably really only about fifty years old. A good part of that is [because] as we integrate more into society, people don't look after each other, which is what we did before. Whether the person was mentally ill, if they were sick, or if they were [crippled](#), or if they were poor, the family took care of each other. As we move into urban centres, that's not happening anymore: families get fragmented

AGGRESSIVE ASSIMILATION

For 150 years up until the 1990s, First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were taken from their families and put into religious residential schools, where they were forced to abandon their traditions, cultural practices and languages. Today, programmes help them reconnect with their identity. **Maria Campbell:** When I was a child we never dreamed about getting an education beyond hoping to be able to read; many of our people were not allowed to go to school because they were [landless](#) people and in our country if you didn't pay taxes you didn't get an education. Today, we have young people in universities, we have doctors, we have many lawyers, teachers, professors, entrepreneurs, we have many many artists, storytellers, singers, poets, writers, people in theatre... It's those people who have been able to bring our story to the world.

RECLAIMING CULTURE

Campbell believes that Métis heritage is being reclaimed. But while Canadians are finally recognising Indigenous values, the vast majority of Métis lead a difficult life. **Maria Campbell:** Really, nothing is ever lost. We [put it down](#) to survive but it's always there for us to come back and pick up. For every gain that we have, for every time we have a child that graduates from university, for each time that one of us can buy a house, we lose many of the lives of our people. Our forests are being cut down, many of our communities can't drink their water. The death of somebody's soul and the [wounding](#) of people's spirits, those things are [hid away](#).

Glossary

- **hanged** = impiccare
- **rose** = avanzare
- **put it down** = mettere da parte
- **Halfbreed** = mezzosangue
- **inaccurate** = impreciso
- **derogatory** = dispregiativo
- **settlements** = accordi
- **hardship** = avversità, difficoltà
- **wisdom** = saggezza
- **belong** = appartenere
- **fur traders** = commercianti di pellicce
- **down-to-earth** = con i piedi per terra
- **worth** = valore
- **draft** = bozza
- **rape** = stupro
- **hid away.** = nascondere
- **disrupted** = interrompere
- **siblings** = fratelli e sorelle
- **settlers** = coloni
- **land theft** = robo de tierras
- **homelessness** = l'essere senza tetto
- **granted** = concedere
- **crippled** = invalido
- **wounding** = ferire
- **life-affirming** = carica vitale
- **landless** = senza terra
- **nurtured** = alimentare
- **claims** = rivendicazioni
- **rates** = indici