



Metis Lighthouse, Quebec, *Canadian Illustrated News*, March 17, 1877.  
Collection Heritage Lower St. Lawrence

## THOMAS FENWICK – REVEREND ARTIST IN METIS

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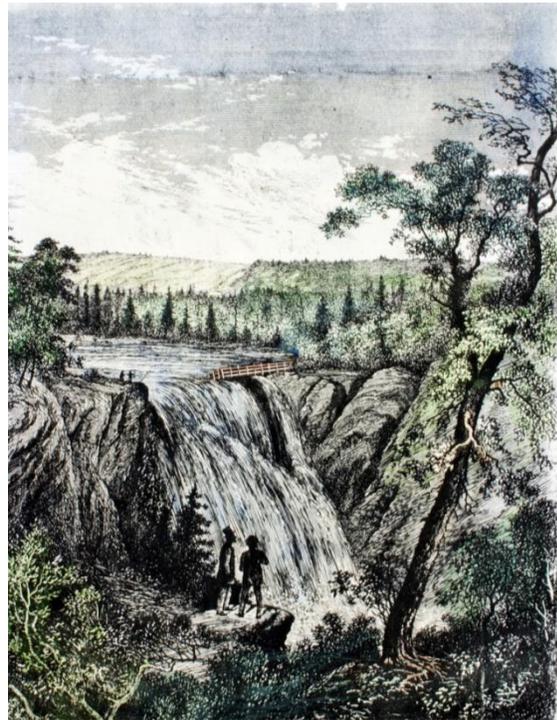
Thomas Fenwick was the artist that documented Metis at the moment of its transformation from a sleepy shoreline village into one of the region's most vibrant tourism destinations. Fenwick lived in Little Metis (the name of the town until it became Metis Beach) from 1863 to 1884. Fenwick's full-time occupation was as the Presbyterian missionary minister at Leggatt's Point, the first and only Protestant church in the region. In his spare time, Fenwick painted and sketched. His illustrations, published in the *Canadian Illustrated News* and *l'Opinion Publique*, were among the first to offer a visual portrayal of the region and its attractions to readers across the country.

Fenwick sketched from the time of his arrival in the region. Born in Scotland, schooled in Toronto and educated to become a Presbyterian missionary at Knox College in Toronto, Fenwick arrived at the Metis mission in 1863. The Metis seigniory comprised the territory east of the Metis River stretching to the eastern limits of Macnider Township (present-day Baie-des-Sables) and south towards Sayabec. It was a community made of up of Scots who began to arrive in 1818 to settle the land offered them by the Seigneur, John Macnider (2018 is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the English-speaking community in the region). Supported by Presbyterian mission societies, Fenwick

dedicated twenty years of his life to serving this small community of farmers, fisherman and early tourism entrepreneurs. The construction of the Intercolonial Railway through the seigniorie from 1871 brought a temporary increase in the Protestant community, but when construction ended and the navvies left, Protestants were outnumbered. The farmers who settled the *rangs* were entirely French-speaking (and Roman Catholic) and soon enveloped Metis, which became a tiny island of English-speakers.

The lonely life of a pastor left Fenwick much time for reading, reflection and painting. Fenwick's priestly duties took him into the hinterland where he sketched buildings and railway bridges. Seeking an audience for his work, he submitted his illustrations to the *Canadian Illustrated News* and its sister publication, *L'Opinion Publique*. Printed in Montreal from 1869, these two popular magazines published articles on what was happening in Canada and around the world. Publisher George Desbarats and his engraver, William Leggo, showed special skill in printing photographs through photo engravings, using a patented procedure called Leggotypes. Many of Canada's leading artists saw their work appear in the magazine's pages. Amateurs, like Fenwick, were not excluded.

The Falls of the Metis of Quebec was the first of his illustrations to appear in the *Canadian Illustrated News* in 1873. Many others followed, both solicited and not. In a letter to Fenwick from October 1878, the editors thanked him for his two "fine aquarelles" and asked for the two "sketches of Métis Station and Little Métis or any other sketch". They added, "We find them really good, particularly one – quite a masterpiece". Although one might question whether "masterpiece" aptly describes his work, Fenwick's illustrations helped promote Metis and contributed to its growing reputation as one of the leading "watering holes" and summer resorts on the St. Lawrence. Soon after the opening of the Intercolonial to regular rail service from Montreal to the station



Fenwick depicted the region's two most iconic features, the lighthouse in Metis (built in 1877) and the falls on the Metis River. The Falls of the Metis of Quebec, *Canadian Illustrated News*, on May 31, 1873. Collection Heritage Lower St. Lawrence

at St. Octave in 1876, Metis was transformed by a building boom, led by J.W. Dawson, principal of McGill University, whose cottage in Metis was completed in 1876. Dawson's family acquired several of Fenwick's watercolours, precious records from a time when photography was not yet widely available.

Each of Fenwick's illustrations in the *Canadian Illustrated News* appeared with a brief article, providing news of the community and its development. He also wrote articles that appeared (without illustrations) in *The Canada Farmer* (on the Rimouski Agricultural Society) and the *Canadian Presbyterian* (on his parish work). He was not shy about expressing his opinions, as when he described the botched hanging of Gustave Moreau in Rimouski in January, 1882 (whose head was nearly severed from his body because the hangman did not calculate the drop properly) and the carnival like atmosphere of the crowd who paid to attend. His free sharing of his opinions in letters to newspapers may have been one of the reasons for his dismissal from the Leggatt's Point Church in 1884. Fenwick lived out his days in Woodbridge, Ontario, north of Toronto, where he regularly received letters from his former parishioners in Metis.

Fenwick also organized exhibitions in Little Metis. Was his the first artist-run gallery in the Gaspésie? Fenwick described the exhibitions at the church where his own work and that of his parishioners was on display. Large portraits of leading figures from the Protestant Reformation, like John Knox, the founder of Presbyterianism in Scotland in the 1560s, were on display. One wonders at the effect of the strange spectacle of banners and portraits on the local Catholic population. The baked goods offered by Fenwick's mother and ample quantities of tea (Fenwick was a teetotaler and advocate of temperance) were perhaps more than enough to compensate. Fenwick's correspondence with the *curé* in the nearby parish of St-Octave suggest that they were usually on friendly terms, finding common ground in fighting the evils of alcohol and working together to keep young Catholic and Protestant women at an appropriate distance.

More than 140 years later, Metis is still home to many amateur painters and the occasional exhibition. And the lighthouse remains one of the favourite subjects, just as it was for Thomas Fenwick, the reverend artist, in the 1870s.