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SPECIAL ISSUE: THE MÉTIS: PAST AND PRESENT**

Edited with Introduction by Thomas Flanagan and John Foster

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Introduction / *The Métis: Past and Present*

The centennial of the Métis uprising led by Louis Riel in the Saskatchewan Valley makes 1985 an appropriate year for *Canadian Ethnic Studies* to publish a special issue on the Métis. The contents of this issue, however, show that one should not identify the Métis too narrowly with the events of 1885.

Several contributions raise the vexing questions of who are the Métis. "Métis," derived from the Latin term *mixticitus* and influenced by the Portuguese and Spanish slave-trade word "Mestizo," is in French the usual term for a person of mixed racial ancestry. In Canada, at least until very recently, the only racial mixing of any numerical consequence was between Euro-Canadians and American Indians, so "Métis" naturally came to refer to persons of mixed Indian and white descent. The racial background of the term has led in many studies to the implicit assumption that racial mixture somehow has influenced socio-cultural behaviour. But in fact the Métis are culturally specific to the pre-settlement communities in Western Canada and their descendants who saw themselves distinct from indigenous Indians and the society of the trading post and who were viewed as distinct by these other two social groups.

In eastern Canada communities distinct from both Indians and Euro-Canadians did not arise, and mixed-race people were defined as either Indian or White. Only in the fur trade areas of Rupert's Land and in the region of the Great Lakes did the "mixed bloods" assume a distinctive ethnic identity — or to be more precise, two identities. As shown in Marcel Giraud's classic study *Le Métis Canadien*, reviewed in this issue by Gilles Martel, the two separate fur trades produced two separate populations. The English and Scottish traders of the Hudson's Bay Company left one set of English-speaking, mostly Protestant children by their native wives; the French traders from Lower Canada left "French-speaking" and Roman Catholic descendants. There was also in this latter group an English and Scottish presence, represented by names such as Grant, Fisher, and McGillis, stemming from the late period when the French fur trade was reorganized as the North West Company under Anglophone management. These British surnames were absorbed into the Francophone Métis community and become French in language and Catholic in religion.

The two dominant métis traditions, that derived from the fur trade based on Hudson Bay and that derived from the fur trade based on the St. Lawrence Great Lakes water systems, remained distinct, even when they settled in the same area, as in the Red River Colony. It would be convenient for scholarly purposes if the former group could be called "half-breeds," "Hudson Bay English," or "Country-born" (to mention a few of the terms which have been proposed), and the latter group could be called "Métis," as they called themselves. But history has gotten in the way of such clean-cut divisions.

In the twentieth century, many of the original Métis of western Canada have adopted English as their preferred or only language, to the point where it is no longer meaningful to distinguish between Anglophone and Francophone "mixed-bloods" in most contemporary situations. In the twentieth century, Métis and "half-breeds" have intermarried to an unmeasured but considerable extent. At the same time the English term "half-breed," pejorative in origin, has come to be considered even more pejorative today. For these reasons the French word "Métis" has entered the English language in Canada as an inclusive term for all persons of mixed Indian and white ancestry who identify themselves as distinct from Indians or Whites. In becoming Anglicized, its pronunciation has changed from the French "Ma-tis" to English "Ma-tee." Orthography has also changed, so that the word is often written today in English without the acute accent. The reader will notice that some authors in this volume use the accent while others do not. It would be a logical solution, which perhaps will be universally adopted one day, to write "Métis" (perhaps even pronounced "Ma-tis") when referring to the Francophone "mixed-bloods" of the fur trade era, and to write "Métis" (pronounced "Ma-tee") when referring in twentieth-century fashion to all "mixed-bloods"; but usage is not yet so standardized. Thus the contemporary meaning of "Métis," however written or pronounced, is specific to context.

In our own day, a second complex of problems has come to overshadow the distinction between the two main Métis traditions that arose in the fur trade era. Certain provisions of the Indian Act have led over the years to the loss of Indian status by persons who were once legally Indians. The most common cause has been the marriage of Indian women to non-Indian men, but other situations have also led to enfranchisement. Since the children of these enfranchised or non-status Indians are also enfranchised, there has arisen a large and ever-expanding group of people with some Indian ancestry who in terms of the Indian Act are not Indians. Many of these enfranchised persons of Indian background, not having a distinct identity of their own, have gravitated towards the Métis, finding in their cultural and political organizations the identity they seek. The original Métis were a phenomenon of western Canada in the pre-settlement period, but non-status Indians live everywhere in the country. The convergence between the two groups has generalized the symbolism of Riel and Red River across Canada, even to distant regions such as the Maritimes where the traditional concept of Métis had no applicability. For a time, it seemed that a lasting political alliance between Métis and non-status Indians would be achieved in the Native Council of Canada; but now the Métis of the western provinces have broken away to form the Métis National Council. Nonetheless, the division between Métis and non-status Indian remains fluid.

The distinction between Anglophone and Francophone Métis of the fur trade era is relevant to the first three papers of this collection as well as to the memoirs of George Sanderson in "Ethnic Voice." P.R. Mailhot and Douglas Sprague use the quantitative techniques of family reconstitution to document the relocation of both English and French Métis from Red River to the Saskatchewan Valley. Their work is an exciting application of advanced historical methodology to an old problem of Canadian historiography. Glen Campbell's study of Louis Riel's poetry necessarily focuses on the French Métis; for in Riel's mind and heart, "his people" were not all of the mixed-blood children of the fur trade,

rather, they were only the French and Catholic element that he called *la nation métisse - canadienne - française*. No topic has been addressed more thoroughly in Canadian scholarship than Louis Riel, but Campbell establishes a new perspective, drawing on the semiotic school of literary criticism as well as on the whole *corpus* of Riel's papers recently assembled by the Louis Riel Project. Barry Cooper's article on Alexander Kennedy Isbister turns our attention to a remarkable "Rupert's Lander," who became a well known and successful educator in Great Britain. Isbister's antagonism toward the Hudson's Bay Company has often been chronicled in Canadian history, but Cooper is the first to portray his career as a whole. The fact that a "half-breed" could, by personal ability and determination, join the upper middle class in the heart of the British Empire should lead to reconsideration of some of the more sweeping generalizations about nineteenth-century racism. Finally, Irene Spry's edition of the memoirs of George Sanderson provides us with a more intimate view of a nineteenth-century Anglophone Métis, whose modest life as a trader and farmer never took him beyond Rupert's Land or what became the Canadian Prairie West. This document joins the small number of accounts of nineteenth-century Métis life written by Métis themselves. For this reason alone it takes on significance in terms of social history.

The other four contributions to this special issue must be read with the distinction between traditional Métis and non-status Indians in mind. Ken Hatt's study of the rhetoric of the participants in the hearings of the Ewing Commission, which led to the establishment of Alberta's Métis Colonies (later, Settlements), shows the difficulty experienced by all, natives as well as whites, in specifying who was a Métis when the rules of the game had their origin in Euro-Canadian concepts rather than historical reality. As well Hatt demonstrates the tendency of our political system to absorb radical protest to produce welfare paternalism rather than the elusive goal of self-determination. Trudy Nicks documents these problems of identity in contemporary Alberta. "Mary Anne," the subject of Nicks' paper, redefined herself from Cree to Métis, causing considerable difficulties of classification for those who collected her native artworks. Nicks also illuminates the peculiar situation of the Alberta Métis who are descended from the "freemen" of the fur trade. They are traditional Métis in the sense of deriving from the fur trade, but they have little connection with the more numerous Red River Métis, either French or English. Sally M. Weaver chronicles the futile attempts in the 1960s and 1970s of the federal government to make policy for the Métis. The reading of her study should sober anyone naive enough to see government intervention as critical to the improvement of the social and economic conditions of the Métis. In "Viewpoint," Joe Sawchuk gives a graphic account, based on personal experience as well as scholarly research, of the current political split between the Métis and non-status Indians. Sawchuk is surely correct in attributing some responsibility for this development to the definition of "native peoples" incorporated in the Constitution Act, 1982; but the split appears to reflect deep-seated and long-lasting differences of identity which one would think could scarcely be repressed for an extended period.

We believe these essays are a useful representation of most current directions in Métis studies. Of course no collection can be complete, and unfortunately some of the most exciting avenues of research are not included here. To mention only two examples, there is nothing about the rediscovery of the American Métis

in the southern Great Lakes region or about the reconstruction of the “Michif” Language now being undertaken by scholars in linguistics. But this is only to say that much research remains to be done before the complexities of the Métis experience are adequately explored. The progress of scholarship is increasingly showing how extended and diverse the Métis reality has been. 1985 is for political reasons a celebration of the North-West Rebellion, but this sample of current research shows that Métis studies are broadening out rather than retreating back upon the central images of Riel and the Rebellion.

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The decline of Batoche after the turn of the century was progressive and was caused by external factors over which the Métis had little or no control. The Canadian Pacific branch line linking Regina to Prince Albert bypassed Batoche. The appearance and availability of new systems of transportation, combined with the steady erosion of the fur trade market inflicted a serious blow on freighting and on the vitality of the community of Batoche as a whole.

The evidence provided clearly illustrates that the Métis community of Batoche experienced economic, political and social difficulties, but that it simultaneously enjoyed "a certain continuity, real expansion and prosperity" from 1870 to 1910. However, within the analysis, the author broaches a series of issues which are left dangling. For example, she states that dissension characterized relations between the Métis and the French Canadians residing in the area. On the other hand, relations between the French settlers and the Métis were harmonious. Why? Hopefully these and other questions which have aroused the reader's curiosity will be answered in another book by the same author to be published in the near future.

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The Genealogy of the First Métis Nation, D. N. Sprague and R. P. Frye. Winnipeg: Pemican Publications, 1983. 38 pp. plus six tables.

The nineteenth-century Métis are astonishingly well documented for a largely illiterate people. They were served throughout most of the century by Protestant and Catholic missionaries who kept written records of births, marriages, and burials. They also dealt extensively with the Hudson's Bay Company, which kept records of contract labour engagements, indebtedness, and land titles in Assiniboia. And because of their complicated land claims, involving occupancy of river lots as well as the distribution of land grants and scrip, they were repeatedly enumerated by federal commissions and their residences were recorded by surveyors.

This book is a pioneering attempt to integrate all this material into one machine-readable data base. Most of the book consists of six long computer printouts of Métis family ties, land holdings, and contractual relationships. The focus is on the Red River colony, although one table gives some information about the dispersion and relocation of the Métis who left Manitoba after 1870. In favorable instances, the data make possible the reconstitution of entire families across two or even three generations.

This data base is imperfect, as the authors are quick to acknowledge. The various sources — parish registers, land titles, etc. — often disagree, not only about minor matters such as the spelling of names but about major matters such as who was married to whom. The complexities of Métis kinship, including death and remarriage, child adoptions and fostering, serial and (rarely) simultaneous polygamy, and marriage *à la façon dupays*, can often be sensed but not always deciphered in the documents. Confusion is often multiplied by the repetition of names, inevitable in a community generated by a small number of paternal ancestors.

But even with all these limitations, the data base is extraordinarily useful. One purpose is simple identification. The data base was used in prepublication form by the Louis Riel Project to help identify hundreds of Métis mentioned *en passant* in Riel's papers. Other researchers working in nineteenth-century Métis history will find the book invaluable for similar purposes. For this reason alone, it is a "must" purchase for any serious scholar of the Métis.

The data can also be employed, and indeed were in part deliberately created, to document the case for contemporary Métis land claims. In other publications, Sprague has used evidence drawn from this material to argue that many Métis did not receive their legal entitlements of land or scrip in Manitoba and the North-West Territories.

Beyond these partisan political uses, the data base also opens up a new scientific frontier in Métis demography and social history. Using techniques of family reconstruction, researchers will be able to shed light on topics as diverse as fertility and natural increase, intermarriage between French and English, patterns of land use, geographical mobility and economic enterprise. The only limit will be the ingenuity of researchers in availing themselves of the techniques of the "new history" (which is no longer very new) in exploiting the data.

Although compilation of this data base is an important scholarly achievement, it does carry some unfortunate signs of the political milieu in which Métis studies are so often conducted. The authors' introduction to the data, which is in effect a capsule history of the Red River settlement, is seriously marred by partisanship even though it also contains novel and striking insights. An example of the latter is the insight that the Hudson's Bay Company tried to keep political influence in Assiniboia out of the hands of those who worked "outside the approved spheres of economic activity." (21) An example of the former is the imputation that this and other Company policies were due to "racism," "bias," and "discrimination." (20) Such a facile interpretation avoids any attempt to reconstruct the Company's economic reasons for acting as it did. Was it racist bias to prefer Europeans over English half-breeds, and English half-breeds over French Métis for clerical-managerial positions, or a hardheaded recognition of the varying aptitudes of different groups? As the work of Thomas Sowell shows, ethnic groups differ greatly from one another, for all sorts of cultural and biological reasons, in their ability to fill particular economic roles. Preference for European or at least English half-breed clerks was, for an English company, no more racist in itself than is the contemporary preference of professional football clubs for black tailbacks and white quarterbacks.

More fundamentally and more regretably, the authors' partisan commitments also affect the data base itself. First of all, the data are proclaimed to be the "Genealogy of the First Métis Nation." Leaving aside the important question of whether "nation" is the correct term for scholars to apply to the Métis (regardless of what their political spokesmen may wish to call themselves for strategic reasons), it is clear that these data pertain to the Red River colony rather than to the Métis as such. Tables 1-5 attempt to capture all residents of Red River prior to 1870, inevitably including a large number of Europeans. John Christian Schultz, but others did not (e.g. Bishop Taché, Father Ritchot, The fault lies not in the data base but in the politically inspired title of the "Métis nation."

A more serious problem of locating the "Métis nation" concerns the place of the English half-breeds. As the authors themselves show, the English and French mixed blood peoples at Red River made up "two communities" with relatively little intermarriage (22). Although religious and linguistic differences are less important among today's Métis, they were highly significant in the last century. Certainly Louis Riel's concept of *la nation métisse-canadienne-française* did not include the English half-breeds. They deserve to be in this data base because it pertains to Red River, but the social reality is misrepresented by the book's tendentious title.

An equally serious problem is the exclusion from the data base of the Métis of Pembina and St. Joseph in the Dakota Territory. These villages were in all important respects a southern prolongation of the Red River colony. Their inhabitants chose to live south of the border to be closer to the buffalo and above all to trade without harassment from the Hudson's Bay Company. But they were socially part of the Red River community, linked by ties of common descent, continued intermarriage, and economic cooperation. The genealogy of many families which are only sketchily represented in this book could have

been filled in with information from across the line. Individuals who suddenly appear, reappear, or disappear from these records will be found to have been residing in St. Joseph and thus not outside the community. The data are in fact abundant. St. Joseph parish registers were kept, and regular censuses were taken, beginning with the Minnesota Territorial census of 1849.

It is a serious oversight not to have included this material or at least to have alluded to its existence. One can only speculate about the cause of the omission, but I suspect it is traceable to the political partisanship which informs (and deforms) the work. Thinking of the Métis primarily as a political interest group whose identity resolves around their claims against the welfare state leads naturally and insensibly to a foreshortened view of their ethnicity. American members of the "nation" drop from consciousness because they are no longer politically relevant, while English half-breeds who do not really share the same identity are mustered onto the genealogy rolls to swell the nation's numbers and importance.

In short, this work by Sprague and Frye is an important scientific achievement which opens up many new directions in Métis studies, but other researchers using their work will have to exercise caution to avoid the politically based illusions which affect not only the book's introduction but the data base itself.

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Le messianisme de Louis Riel, Gilles Martel. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984. 481 pp.

Gilles Martel contends that Louis Riel is central to any analysis of the tragic epic of the Métis nation in the nineteenth century. He claims that the principal motivating force for Riel was his belief in his own prophetic mission. Clearly, Martel agrees with Thomas Flanagan that Riel cannot be understood without examining his messianic ideas. While Flanagan ties Riel's messianic thoughts to native religion, Martel does not. Indeed, Martel maintains that Riel refused to admit the Indian cultural heritage in Métis society. Unlike those scholars who saw Riel within the framework of cultural conflict or clash of regions, Martel presents a fresh approach to this much studied subject.

Martel's excellent book is essentially his doctoral thesis in sociology from the Université de Paris. In his work, Martel is not interested in whether Louis Riel was a hero or villain, whether he symbolized native rather than French-Catholic resistance, or whether he was a defender of Métis culture and western identity. Rather, Martel, the sociologist, takes an hypothesis about messianic movements and then attempts to prove it by examining Louis Riel and the Métis on Canada's prairies.

For his study, Gilles Martel uses the analytical concepts developed by Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz. She argues that a messianic movement is born at the convergence of two forces: first, there must be a traditional society in a state of crisis where religion favours the belief in the return of a hero or divinity; and second, there must be an individual who is convinced he is that hero or divinity and whose personality is sufficiently strong to bind a group about himself and his message of hope. After establishing this approach, Martel then proceeds to demonstrate through a sociological and psycho-sociological analysis that both of these conditions existed in the prairie west in the last century.

In his sociological analysis, Martel briefly describes the origin and development of the Métis as a group. He then examines the colony of Red River and finds that it conforms to Pereira de Queiroz's definition of "traditional society." The Francophone Métis were Catholic and hunters while the Scottish half-breeds were Protestant and farmers. These two groups lived juxtaposed to one another in splendid isolation. Religiously, both