

1. Genesis

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Closely associated with the history of the western regions in all the phases of their development, ... [the Métis population] forms the link between present and past, and serves as tradition in a country where events are soon absorbed into the movement of modern life and leave no memory. (Giraud 1945: 1250; my translation)

The Concept of Métis

The word *Métis* comes from Low Latin *mixticium* through Middle French *mestis*, “racially mixed”; one of its earliest occurrences goes back to the end of the 12th century, when Girard de Roussillon mentioned “ces mestis Franceis, demi Borgoisings” (“those French ‘Métis’, half-Burgundians”). The word is related to Spanish *Mestizo*, meaning a person of mixed ancestry. Both genetic and cultural halfbreeds exist throughout the colonized world; yet the Canadian Métis, with perhaps the Cape Coloured and the Haitians, are unique in that they were able to “successfully assert political and legal rights, for a period at least, against the national government” (Daniels 1979a: 7). Those Métis, who gave Canada her only semblance of an Indian war with the 1885 Riel Rebellion (now generally called “Resistance”), were the result of unions between French *voyageurs*, *coureurs de bois*, or traders with Indian or Halfbreed women: “These first ‘half-breeds’ were literally that, probably the offspring of Frenchmen from Champlain’s company, which established Quebec in 1608, and of Indian women among the Huron and Algonquin tribes” (Howard 1974: 39). Later, “families became very important for many voyageurs who worked for long periods in the trade and especially for those who decided not to leave the Northwest, settling down with their families in the interior and forming the foundations of Métis communities” (Podruchny

2006: 267). The Cree especially were instrumental in these unions: they were first identified by the French as *Kristinaux* in the 17th century, and were trading with them at Lake Nipigon by 1684 (Dickason 1980: 32).

Price notes that

Differences between the Europeans who arrived in the New World played an important role in determining the nature of Indian-European relations. For example, the French, Spanish and Portuguese were more tolerant than northern Europeans of intermarriage with the Natives. Thus, since early historical times there have been significant populations of Spanish-Indian 'Mestizos' and French-Indian 'Métis,' but few British-Indian 'Halfbreeds,' considering the size of the British population in North America. (Price 1978: 82)

Even though this argument should not be overstated, at the beginning of the colonial period the French do seem to have conciliated the Indians to a greater extent than did the British: the former were interested in trade, whereas the latter were land-hungry. Moreover, "women were not brought out from France, which gave an added incentive for friendly attitudes" (Eccles 1972: 11). This mixing of the French with the Indians really began in the 16th century about the Gulf of St. Lawrence amid cod-fishing and fur-trading activities. It was quickly intensified by the policies of the Catholic government in French Canada, which made any Indian who embraced Catholicism a French subject, "with all the rights and privileges appertaining, including the right to settle in France whenever they wished" (Eccles 1972: 39). Although few, if any, availed of them, such overtures were conducive to potentially harmonious relationships between the two ethnic groups. Soon the French halfbreeds were the most numerous, and the French word *Métis* has come to designate all persons of mixed European and Indian ancestry in Canada.

The Métis as a distinctive ethnic group are now largely a western phenomenon, but they were born out of a long period of interaction between Indians and Whites in the St. Lawrence and Upper Great Lakes regions. Trading communities were also found on the periphery of the Great Lakes, as far south as Cahokia, Illinois (Peterson 1978: 45), and most of their inhabitants were of mixed race. However, the aggressive colonization of the American Middle-West in the first half of the 19th century forced those halfbreeds to take refuge among Indian tribes or in the Red River area of Manitoba, or more rarely to merge with American Whites. The Métis—mostly Indian and French Canadian, but Highland Scot, English and Yankee

as well—survived as a separate group mainly north of the international border. Trading in what are now the Prairie provinces, they “spent a large part of their lives in the northwest, living among the Indian nations, marrying Indian girls, more Indian than French in their way of life and their values” (Eccles 1972: 146). Assumption of the broker role necessitated a continuous cycle of intermarriage which allowed the Métis to function “not only as human carriers linking Indians and Europeans, but as buffers behind which the ethnic boundaries of antagonistic cultures remained relatively secure” (Peterson 1978: 55). Many of them were involved in buffalo hunting, an activity which supplied the provisions essential to the boreal forest fur trade—along which, indeed, “there is no section of the route that does not have a Métis presence” (Marchildon and Robinson 2002: 28). They were to be found where the frontier then was, and thus provided Canada with the genuine facilitators of western expansion that the United States always lacked; it is possible indeed that “without their help the process would have been much bloodier than it was” (Howard 1974: 40).

The Métis are traditionally portrayed as a marginal society with a distinctive culture characterized by a blend of Indian “reticence” (Preston 1976) and Gallic *joie de vivre*—or, to use Giraud’s (1945: 874ff) stereotype, by a temperament reserved first, then congenial and impulsive. All these rough facets of the Métis’ personality made them a colourful people with their own privileged place in Canadian folklore, where they are identified “as much by their blue pantaloons, capote and fiddle, as by their leggings, red finger-woven sash, moccasins, hair feathers and tattoos” (Peterson 1978: 53).

Whereas the term *Métis* formerly characterized “less a racial category than an incipient ethnic group, entry into which could be acquired through marriage and self-designation, as well as birth” (Peterson 1978: 46), today it is also an administrative and, since the 1982 Canadian Constitution Act, a legal definition. A Métis is now a person with any degree of Indian blood who is not registered on a reserve. As such, the term *Métis* covers about one million people in Canada, as compared to some 250,000 registered Indians. It covers “many non-Status Indians [who] live in Métis colonies on land to which they have no title, and which is not reserved under the Indian Act” (Manuel and Posluns 1974: 243).

The Métis “Race”

Canada’s contemporary Métis are genetic and cultural halfbreeds of Amerindian and White ancestry. Physically, they exhibit a continuum of phenotypes ranging from the features generally associated with American Mongoloid groups, to those considered characteristic of Caucasoid groups.

Culturally, they share an ambivalent status owing to their marginal legal position halfway between the registered Indians and the dominant White society. Some Métis leaders (e.g., Daniels 1979a) have claimed that the future of their people lies in an integration of the normally conflicting Indian and White lifestyles; according to them, the Métis are best equipped for such symbiosis because they were born from the contact. This comparatively recent revival of hybrid ethnicity has been accompanied by references to the Métis' colourful history of canoe expeditions and buffalo hunting; and from countless apocryphal anecdotes there emerges the figure of what can be called the "ideal Métis." This ideal human type was supposedly endowed with physical attributes superior to those of the mean parental populations, as well as with great personal vitality and buoyancy (see, e.g., such culture heroes as James McKay, Jerry Potts, or Gabriel Dumont). These characteristics can be considered representative of the controversial phenomenon of hybrid vigour, or heterosis.

On the one hand, it seems well established that exogamy brings about an increase in overall body size (Damon 1965), perhaps because exogamous individuals are more heterozygous, and heterozygotes are believed to be more adaptable, their genetic configuration allowing them to exploit their environment more efficiently. On the other hand, heterosis in animal crosses is "usually manifested to its fullest extent by the first filial generation" (Trevor 1953: 26), and in the human case of Mongoloid/Caucasoid miscegenation there is generally Mongoloid dominance after the first few generations (Olivier 1964). It must be also noted that the breakdown of genetic isolates leading to heterosis may be accompanied in some cases by negative changes in physiological responses, such as the onset of increased systolic blood pressure with age (Kirk 1981: 146).

It seems reasonable to assume that the mean body development of a first generation hybrid group, when expressed through anthropometric measurements, will be significantly superior to the parental average (Hiernaux and Heintz 1967); but this increased development is likely to fluctuate in the following generations according to such intervening factors as selective mating and differential death rates. Bearing this restriction in mind, it appears that "the hybrid series in general have a greater degree of non-European than of European ancestry" (Trevor 1953: 31), and that heterosis in Mongoloid/Caucasoid miscegenation is marked by an apparent enlargement of the head, characterized by a greater cephalic index and an increase in trunk size. In the past century, however, these positive features have been somewhat tempered by a widespread breakdown in health, owing to the usual anomic repercussions of an unsatisfactory state of acculturation.

Giraud (1945: 1266) had already made the point:

Venereal diseases often ravage these constitutions already debilitated by alcohol and malnutrition, exposed through insufficient clothing to the effects of the cold, vulnerable to tuberculosis. (My translation)

To this list we can now add diabetes, whose incidence is even higher in people of Aboriginal ancestry than among the mainstream population.

Isolated Métis communities where research has been conducted (see, e.g., Douaud 1985, Bakker 1997) have often shown a high level of endogamy since the end of the 19th century, and exhibit a wide range of variation in terms of skin pigmentation and eye colour. Hair form and body size, however, are held remarkably constant: the hair is black and straight, and the build generally mesomorph with pyknic tendency (especially in males). Also—and this fact has been commented upon by many earlier observers (e.g., De Trémaudan 1979 [1935]: 33, 47)—the Métis are often above Euro-Canadian average in stature, especially as regards the French Canadians, who were the most involved in Indian-White miscegenation. It is also common for Caucasoid-dominant Métis to have children exhibiting strong recessive Mongoloid phenotypic traits. Of course, some of these characteristics would apply equally well to numerous contemporary Canadian Indians, very few of whom are genetically pure Aboriginals (Card et al. 1963: 187).

These overall physical characteristics, coupled with the cultural vitality and adaptability typical of traditional Métis communities, point indeed to the existence of a phenomenon akin to heterosis. However, Métis ethnicity is no longer based on shared physical characteristics, which in any case are felt to have lost some of their uniformity. Instead, it is subordinated to a *perception* of ethnicity brought about by a flexible definition of community boundaries and by an idealization of the past; as Bakker (1997: 62) has noted, “even the most acculturated of the Métis, those living in big cities, usually socialize with members of their group alone.” A community is rarely bounded by fences and signposts: much more often it is shaped by the overlap of adjacent cultural continua of social organization, language, dress, diet, etc; and its boundaries are integrated as a series of cues, “built into the psychoneural systems of its human components and systematized by the activities of each individual” (Thompson 1967: 73). These elusive cues may well be the real binding agent in contemporary hybrid ethnicity: here heterosis, in so far as it has an objective reality, only serves the idealization of a symbol of past glory. Being a Métis nowadays seems to be largely a matter of perception; or, as Brown (1985: 204) remarked,

The full story of *métissage* (racial mixing) as a sociocultural and political phenomenon in northern North America involves the study and understanding of a wide range of individual and group experiences—both those that led to *la nation métisse* and those in which *métissage* was a potentiality denied, unrecognized, or left unfulfilled, perhaps to be discovered some generations later.

The Métis Nation

The Métis people are often called “the offspring of the Canadian fur trade.” As the European fur traders in the east needed wives, they simply chose them from the Indian tribes whose territories overlapped the trade—mainly Cree and Ojibwa, both being close relatives within the Woodlands culture of Algonquian-speaking Aboriginals. From the 17th century on, as the fur trade expanded westward, the Métis proliferated in Rupert’s Land:

The French colonies of the West, so largely of mixed blood, had begun, and the *coureur de bois*, restless and lawless, was to give way to the *voyageur*, an *engagé* (indentured worker) who toiled at the paddle and the portage but did not winter with the Indians or collect furs. (Morton 1969: 96)

Voyageurs represented “a time of possibilities, when the pattern of colonization was not inevitable or inexorable” (Podruchny 2006: 308). The Métis came to embody these possibilities: at the same time as they were instrumental in the fur trade and the concomitant geographic explorations, they became semi-settled and some even farmed part of the year; their homes, grouped around the European trading posts, formed the basis for the Métis settlements which would later radiate in the organized buffalo hunt.

In 1811 Lord Selkirk obtained from the Hudson’s Bay Company a grant enabling him to settle a number of evictees from the Scottish land clearances on an area of land by the Assiniboine and Red rivers, which became known as District of Assiniboia. In 1814 the governor of Assiniboia attempted to forbid the buffalo hunt and to limit the pemmican trade—the very essence of Métis economic and cultural life—in the hope of boosting the White settlers’ economy. Led by Cuthbert Grant, the Métis resisted; there followed a period of harassment between the two factions, neither side realizing that they were pawns in the game played by the North West Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company over fur trade monopoly. The White settlers were finally driven away by the Métis after the battle of Seven Oaks (1816); however, the conflict went on between the two Companies until their eventual merger in

1821. The latter operation encouraged the emergence of new Anglo settlements on the Red River, so that “the French Canadians were now cut off from the vast spaces of the west which they had always regarded as their country, where their language was the lingua franca” (Eccles 1972: 248). Also, a number of Métis who until then had had regular employment with either Company were forced to settle or else to move farther west.

The Red River Settlement thus comprised a semi-nomadic population (Métis, Hudson Bay English, and Indians) and a White contingent of sedentary farmers (Kildonan Scots, French Canadians, and others). The Métis were distinctly predominant (Foster 1972: 96), and their activities typically included buffalo hunting and employment in the fur trade, as well as gardening. The task of educating them was shared by the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church, the former assuming a preponderant role because of its association with the more numerous francophone Métis. After the Treaty of Paris (1763), religion had become increasingly important to French Canadians as a social and spiritual solace, all the more so as they found themselves further alienated from the culture of France’s *Ancien Régime* by the Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire (Eccles 1972: 247). The soothing role of the Church was reinforced by the failure of the *Patriotes* rebellion in the Montreal region in 1837, and very soon French Catholicism began to spread to the remotest areas of the west. Thus it is that the cohesion of isolated Métis communities was largely maintained by Oblate priests and lay brothers, as well as Grey Nuns, of French, Breton, Belgian, or Quebecois origin. The association of the Canadian Métis with the Church began early, and it is no exaggeration to say with Sealey and Kirkness (1974: 43) that “the Church and its teachings touched every aspect of Métis life.”

While the Roman Catholic Church had established its first mission in the Red River colony in 1818 (the first settlers of Lord Selkirk were Catholics), the Protestant Church arrived there in 1820. Apart from their commitment to keeping in check the moral standards of their flocks, the two Churches were strong advocates of farming and related activities. Also the Catholic Church, mostly French-speaking, urged the Métis to preserve their French language in the same way as it later urged the Irish to revive the Gaelic tongue: the ecclesiastic authorities knew well that linguistic/cultural separateness tends to strengthen internal social and spiritual bonds. The English Métis were thus allowed to merge into White society to a far greater extent than the French ones, all the more so because of the traditional Protestant concern for spreading literacy.

Recognized as a “majority group and, therefore, socially acceptable” (Sealey and Lussier 1975: 47) due to their essential role in the still little-

civilized life of Assiniboia, the Métis thrive and expanded, becoming the masters of the plains south of Fort Garry (now Winnipeg) thanks to their buffalo-hunting skills. Around 1850 the total population of the Red River settlement was 5,000, three quarters of whom were halfbreeds. Métis buffalo hunting was an adaptive strategy for the whole settlement, as environmental and technological conditions for agriculture were less than favourable: the hunters thus supplied not only the Hudson's Bay Company, but also the river-lot farmers (Sprenger 1972). This was also the time when the Métis were able to beat an army of several hundred Sioux warriors at the battle of Grand Coteau in 1851, and to trade officially with the United States after breaking the Hudson's Bay Company's trade monopoly in Rupert's Land in 1849.

At the same time, their culture was becoming more European under the Church's influence—except in the case of the Métis “winterers,” i.e., those free traders who were operating as far west as “Whoop-up Country” (southern Alberta and Saskatchewan, and Montana) and were thus dependent on no one (Sharp 1973: 38). The progress of civilization in the West was felt more strongly from 1857 onwards, as more White settlers arrived, steamboats appeared on the Red River (supplanting the overland transportation system by cart), and the buffalo herds dwindled rapidly. However, it was difficult for the Métis to understand that their prosperity was built on precarious frontier conditions, and would therefore be doomed when the prevalent system of opportunities vanished. This inevitable change was precipitated by the taking over by Canada of the administration of the Northwest from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1869—a momentous transfer that marked the end of two centuries of Company rule in non-civilized Canada.

The Métis, whose interests clashed with those of the alien Canadian government in remote Ottawa, went through a period of insurrections, first in Manitoba (1870), then in what is now Saskatchewan (1885). As Manuel and Posluns (1974: 22) remark, “it was not even armed resistance, so much as an effort to set up a government to meet the needs that Ottawa so consistently ignored.” Governmental ruthlessness, driven by the rise of nationalism and capitalism, expressed itself in the same fashion all over the New World, associated as it was with the push westwards and the building of trans-continental railways. In Argentina, for example,

The railway from Rosario to Córdoba, the Central Argentino, stipulated the gift of one league on either side of the track to the capitalists. The Central Argentino thus expelled the settlers on its entire stretch, and then formed subsidiary companies that sold those lands in large lots to

various individuals. [...] it was a common occurrence in high-risk countries such as Argentina, and it was also done in the United States and in India, because there was a desperate need to unite regions which until then had been separated. (Luna 1993: 114–15; my translation)

Following the Métis defeat at Batoche in 1885, their leader Louis Riel, both an astute politician and an unstable millenarian prophet (see Stanley 1963, Flanagan 1979 and Siggins 1994 for three complementary descriptions of Riel's personality), was executed. This was the end of a small-scale, unspectacular war whose consequences, however, would be far-reaching:

The North-West Field Force and its Alberta counterpart suffered precious little in terms of dead and wounded, but few armies have gained so much for so small a sacrifice. The destruction of the Métis republic confirmed for once and all the transfer of power in western Canada from the Hudson's Bay Company to Ottawa. [...] the Métis movement was finished. (Vandervort 2006: 227)

The Métis Nation now dead, its members were considered traitors whose rebellious activities had "frightened away many land-seekers and discouraged western investors" (Sharp 1973: 315). The Métis proceeded to intensify a dispersion which had begun in 1870 when a number of them, dissatisfied with the outcome of their first insurrection and harassed by the White settlers' hostility, migrated farther west, or south to the United States (especially North Dakota and Montana, where their descendants are still living). Furthermore, small isolated groups had been leaving Manitoba regularly since the 1820s for distant regions in what are now Saskatchewan and Alberta. However, ties between the Red River and remote communities remained for some time, in the face of economic exploitation:

It was almost a hundred years in 1884 that the Hudson's Bay Company had been facing competition on the part of the Lac La Biche people, who openly practiced a 'free' fur trade in spite of the Company's interdiction. Challenging the Company's monopoly and refusing to accept a ridiculous price for furs that were worth a lot of money, the Métis used to go to the Red River to sell them. (Le Treste 1997: 100, note 1; my translation)

Thus it is that at the end of the 19th century the Western Métis found themselves without land or status, rejected by the Whites, kept off the Indian reserves, and deprived of their economic and cultural basis: the

gregariousness of the large organized buffalo hunt, with its emphasis on disciplined self-sufficiency and cooperation. They had become an ambulatory, rather than migratory, people.

Entry Into the Modern World

Some Métis integrated into White society while others became incorporated into the Indian reserve system, but these were marginal cases: as a rule, the Métis after 1885 were a semi-nomadic destitute people, and life for them was of the moment. Whole families wandered from job to job, trapping, hunting and fishing the comparatively depleted areas they covered. They turned fringe dwellers who, gathering outside White communities in shanty towns, or along roads and railways, were then known as the “road allowance people”; this label quickly became associated with the traditional image of a beaten people, connoting alcoholism, fights, prostitution, jail sentences, etc.—not unlike the social stigma attached to the European Gypsies or the Irish Travellers living in shanty-towns (Fraser 1992; Douaud and Cronin 1992). This state of affairs lasted until well after World War II, when Campbell (1973: 1–2) notes: “The Halfbreed families who squatted on the road allowance have moved to nearby towns where welfare handouts and booze are handier, or else deeper into the bush as an escape from reality.”

Those Métis who had been living in isolated rural communities since before the 1885 Resistance led a secluded existence far away from the political and economic turmoils, converted to part-time farming and protected by the Catholic Church, whose influence on many Canadian Aboriginal people had been constant since the 17th century (De Trémaudan 1979: 66; Leacock 1981: 43–62). As for those who had integrated early into the mainstream of Canadian society, they were especially contemptuous of their less acculturated relatives. The Indians had been granted treaties and lived on reserves where, however unsatisfactory the conditions may have been, they could at least retain their identity and tribal cohesion. The ordinary Métis had none of this—they were definitely outside the general path of “progress,” yet they were not marginal enough to be put aside under special status: as a result, “the mental set of the Métis was one of hopelessness, and a feeling that failure would be their lot no matter what efforts were expended” (Sealey and Lussier 1975: 144–45); or, as Giraud put it earlier, “squashed between two economies and two societies, they are in a sense looked upon as white trash (Pauvres Blancs)” (1945: 1258, my translation). However, in spite or because of this lack of outside support, the Métis maintained the collective vitality that characterized their short-lived Nation on the Red River; they depended on nobody except the Church, and thus could retain a semblance

of freedom, even though it had been dearly acquired. It is possible to differentiate them into four categories, from more modern to more traditional:

- (i) those integrated Métis who had settled definitively and had successfully adapted to Euro-Canadian culture; they had either crossed the colour line or become *historical Métis*, i.e., people proud of their past grandeur but resentful of the “degeneration” characterizing the other modern Métis;
- (ii) those living on the fringe of White settlements: the “road allowance people” described in Campbell (1973), wandering from job to job and destitute;
- (iii) those living on the fringe of Indian reserves: a common phenomenon, aptly illustrated by Dion (1979: 159), then a schoolteacher on Kehiwin’s Reserve in 1903: “At the Indian agent’s first visit to our little schoolhouse he noted that it was bursting at the seams and I had to confess that a number of children came from Métis parents who were staying in the vicinity. The agent immediately ordered the removal of all halfbreeds from the reserve”;
- (iv) those living in small isolated communities, with an economy based on fishing, trapping and hunting: this group best preserved the traditional Métis identity and was to provide most of the Métis leaders who arose after World War II.

The reason why the great majority of the Métis did not readily integrate into White society is simple: like so many people of Aboriginal descent, they “were asked to work within an economic structure they poorly understood, with obligations and responsibilities to be assumed that their previous lifestyle inhibited” (Sealey and Lussier 1975: 136). As *voyageurs* and meat suppliers, the Métis could only last as long as the frontier lasted: then, their economy would have to be based on more settled activities such as agriculture and commercial fishing. The White man’s attempts at forcing them into such a transition generally failed for three reasons: a) the Métis were expected to adapt quickly to the new lifestyle; b) White speculators often manipulated those holding land scrips into selling them for a pittance—in 1901, a Fort Chipewyan Métis even sold his scrip to finance his wedding! (Scollon and Scollon 1979: 40); and c) seldom did the White authorities show much understanding or provide thorough aid (as in the case of the Indians, farming implements and seeds were often of inferior grade, or lacking altogether). For example, such an experimental transition failed at St. Paul-des-

Métis (Alberta) at the turn of the century: the newly created Métis farming colony was unable to expand its land exploitation and produce a surplus; also, its members became easily discouraged if they did not see immediate results, and were all too inclined to abandon the project. This is exactly what happened—following which White farmers took over the land (see Drouin 1968 for further details). It became evident that the Métis, if they could be efficient gardeners or “bush farmers,” were at any rate unable or unwilling to adapt to the large-scale dominant agricultural system; moreover, they traditionally preferred stock to crop farming (De Trémaudan 1979: 385).

The fate of the Canadian Métis thus resembles more that of the American Indians than of the Canadian Indians: the land they lived on was taken, and they were forcibly driven west until eventually they were allowed to open some settlements there. Like the Métis, the American Indians were allotted land (through the Dawes Act of 1887) which they often sold for a pittance as they were not ready to farm, did not know how to transact operations, and were not honestly encouraged to learn about either (Deloria 1969: 46–47). Governmental attitudes towards all people of aboriginal ancestry, on the other hand, were remarkably similar in both countries: one is thus forced to extend to the Métis Dawson’s (2002: 11) assertion that often “the decisions made by these officials were for the benefit of the government rather than of the First Nations farmers and ranchers whom they were supposed to be representing.”

During the Great Depression the Métis were worse off than ever. However, as frequently happens in the direst situations, it was then that the first modern Métis political leaders began to emerge in Saskatchewan and in Alberta, and these strove to improve the condition of their people. For a long time, Canadian Métis were not defined legally by the federal government: only provincial governments dealt with them qua Métis. In this respect, the Prairie provinces alone concerned themselves with this minority group: Saskatchewan provided its Métis with education and employment assistance; Manitoba gave Métis and Indians priority for trapping licences, and purveyed Métis communities with special schools geared to the needs of their culture (Rivard and Parker 1975: 1–49). In Alberta, Métis colonies were established under the Métis Betterment Act of 1938, and a Métis Trust Fund was created to receive royalties for the resources taken from Métis land. Dion (1979: 185) writes:

These Métis settlements are not Indian reserves. The administration differs in that the Métis settlements are under a rehabilitation plan aimed at bringing the Métis back to their former independent status and to protect them until such a

time when they will be able to handle their own business to advantage.

This time has come and the quest for land continues, although the White administration is slow to relax its paternalistic protection. Métis educator Bev Cardinal has stated, "My Elders [...] say that the only people who truly own the land are the generations yet unborn" (Cardinal 2002: 76). If this is true, time is on the Métis' side.

After World War II and the subsequent opening of the common social attitude towards cultural minorities, the "Métis problem" gained more recognition and local organizations were created. Also, the National Indian Council was founded in 1961, to split in 1968 into the National Indian Brotherhood and the Canadian Métis Society—the latter including enfranchised Indians. The Native Council of Canada was born in 1971 with the aim of achieving full Native (mixed and "full" blood) participation in the life of modern Canadian society. Here is a significant excerpt from the Council's Declaration of Rights (Daniels 1979b):

We the Métis and non-Status Indians, descendants of the 'original people' of this country, declare: That Métis nationalism is Canadian nationalism. We embody the true spirit of Canada and we are the source of Canadian identity.

(...)

That we have the right to preserve our identity and to flourish as a distinct people with a rich cultural heritage.

(...)

That we are a people with a right to special status in Confederation.

This Declaration asserts the old Métis claim that they are the true Canadians: both Indians and Whites are immigrants with only a difference in time between their respective arrivals—whereas the Métis represent a genuinely indigenous hybrid race. As such they see themselves as a frame of reference in which Canada might find her long-sought identity, thereby transcending the petty factionalism and latent racism that are an integral part of her ethnic mosaic. The Métis are exposed to both Indian and White traditions: given the opportunity, they could "have the best of both cultures," as Albertan Métis Elder Adrian "Pete" Hope was fond of saying. The mention at the time of a "right to special status in Confederation" raised perhaps the thorniest issue in a society then officially opposed to special status of any kind—a position made clear by the Trudeau government's 1969

White Paper, which purported to promote integration but was unanimously rejected by Aboriginal organizations (Titley 1979). Yet, fully granting the Métis claim would perhaps simply amount to the recognition of what Manuel and Posluns (1974) termed the "Fourth World," representing the world of indigenous minorities and a concept which has since been slowly accepted. Some Métis leaders consider their people best equipped for a symbiosis of the Fourth World and the dominant society, as they were biologically and culturally born from such a contact. This claim to special status rests on the belief that the colonizing process which bestowed guilt upon the Whites and despair upon the Indians gave *substance* to the Métis.

The Métis drew their originality from the fusion of two cultures that formerly were non-static and interacting. Now that one of them has become more static—or in certain cases, anomic—under the repression of the other, it might appear that the way to internal harmony lies in the creation of a new type of dynamism in the less urbanized areas of Canada. This is the goal to which a number of Métis leaders have been devoting themselves since the 1960s, their prime objective being the cementing of Métis unity. This task has been comparatively easy, as a clear sense of distinct political identity has prevailed among them since the days of the Métis Nation. This is quite unlike the Aboriginal situation, where the various tribes found unity in their common Indian-ness only well into the 20th century and began to develop a pan-Indian identity when they realized it gave Aboriginal groups some survival advantage.

Unlike the Aboriginals, too, the Métis have been "forgotten": because in a post-industrial society which still has some difficulty comprehending social or ideological overlaps and which instinctively imposes clear-cut characteristic labels on all its members, no one knows exactly on which side the Métis are. For some they are europeanized Indians, for others indianized Whites; from the very beginning, "members of two mutually exclusive groups, they were rebuffed by both" (Howard 1974: 42). So far the label *Métis* has hardly been synonymous with political success, yet it is on the basis of their former Nation that the people concerned want to be "remembered" and recognized as a distinct cultural group, regardless of superficial physical or behavioural variation among them. One of the means leading to this end is of course land ownership. The Métis living outside settlements have wanted to possess some land in order to be safe from exploiters taking over their government-leased lands; those who live in settlements have viewed with trepidation the depletion of natural resources closing in on them, and the expansion of industrialization; many now consider that the future of the settlements lies in the development of small industries which will render welfare allowances unnecessary.

Métis unity can be strengthened by a concept of unity that transcends the principle of ethnic distinctiveness and absorbs the various aboriginal peoples who share common difficulties in the face of White society and development. One such attempt was the creation in 1972 of the National Indian Movement of Canada, which purported to unite Status Indians, enfranchised Indians, Métis and Inuit. The common political action of all these peoples may well contribute to shaping the future of White society too, and enable it to achieve finally what should be the goal of its enormous technological effort: a comprehensive cultural equipoise. Métis architect Douglas Cardinal shared this vision when he wrote: "The measure of a man is seen through the prosperous life that surrounds him, not the inanimate objects he has forcibly acquired" (Cardinal and Melnyk 1977: 55).

The Land Problem

One of the best-known—one could say hackneyed—differences between Aboriginal and White worldviews is that Aboriginals think they belong to the land, whereas Whites consider the land belongs to them: "many fundamental Indian values are not only incompatible with those of American culture, but work directly in opposition to the principles on which the modern competitive capitalistic order is based" (Ablon 1964: 297). Much of the failure which characterizes Aboriginal-White arrangements or agreements can be accounted for on the basis of this difference. The situation is even more complicated in the case of the Métis because they exhibit a dual pattern of attitudes that White society deems irreconcilable:

- (i) on the one hand the Métis traditionally share with Indians a lack of interest for hoarding material wealth, and are therefore viewed as Indians by the Whites. Campbell (1973: 27) typifies this cultural incompatibility very neatly through a Saskatchewan Métis' view of White settlers just after World War II: "These people rarely raised their voices, and never shared with each other, borrowing or buying instead. They didn't understand us, just shook their heads and thanked God they were different."
- (ii) on the other hand the Métis also differ from the Indians by their spontaneous exuberance and lack of social restraint. Campbell again (1973: 25): "There was never much love lost between Indians and Halfbreeds. They were completely different from us—quiet when we were noisy, dignified even at dances and go-togethers."

Even though these differences should not be exaggerated and have probably been somewhat levelled by the flow of time, it is clear from such observations that the Métis have always had their own distinct values. Métis leader Harry Daniels capitalized on this fact when he warned: "If the Métis are to found effective organizations, these should have their roots in past traditions" (Daniels 1979a: 27). These past traditions emphasized distinctiveness from both Indians and Whites, and based survival on action and resistance—a line of conduct that can indeed be readily taken up by any repressed minorities wishing to assert themselves. The Métis reaction in the middle of the 20th century was timely: "At present they are re-emerging as an ethnic group, with only informal—not legal—recognition by the federal government," noted Frideres (1974: 3). More concerned than the federal government, the three Prairie provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, which include the majority of the Canadian Métis) have launched helping programs carried out with various degrees of determination. The Métis settlements of Alberta are a case in point:

For many years the Métis in the 2 000 square miles of Métis land would be forced to eke out a living through agriculture, trapping, hunting and fishing. The discovery and exploitation of natural gas and oil deposits in the Métis settlements in recent decades promised better days but instead resulted in over \$30 million in oil and gas bypassing the Métis Trust Fund on its way to the Alberta Heritage Trust, the petro-dollar account of the provincial government. (Daniels 1979a: 81)

As in the case of the First Nations, provincial efforts to control oil and gas resources, hence economic and political power, have triggered off endless law suits concerning land claims, as the Métis have considered it a breach of trust that underground resources are not allocated to them in the same way as surface resources. It is the same old story:

To this day, the authorities, the public, and even the people affected, think in terms of 'Indian and Métis' problems, or of injustices done to 'Natives.' They posit solutions with ethnic boundaries in mind, not realising that they are buying into a racist perspective. (St-Onge 2004: 96)

How could it ever come to this? Such is the question that this book is trying to answer.

About this Book

There follows a collection of articles concerning the Western Métis, published in *Prairie Forum* over a quarter of a century between 1978 and 2004—with the only exception of David McCrady's recent (2007) piece on three heretofore unpublished letters of Louis Riel. These articles have been chosen for the breadth and scope of the investigations upon which they are based, and for the reflections they will arouse in anyone interested in Western Canadian history and politics.

The first one, "The Métis: the People and the Term," by John Foster (1978), clears up some of the confusion surrounding the meanings of the terms "Métis," "Halfbreed," and "Iroquois" in their historical contexts by distinguishing two trading systems, the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes and the Hudson Bay systems, each endowed with its particular fur trade tradition. The second article, by Ruth Swan and Edward Jerome (2004), is titled "Indigenous Knowledge, Literacy and Research on Métissage and Métis Origins on the Saskatchewan River: The Case of the Jerome Family"; it makes use of Métis genealogies to trace early French penetration into the Saskatchewan River area and identifies one François Jérôme as among La Vérendrye's original companions in the middle of the 18th century and one of the ancestors of the Red River buffalo-hunting Métis. The third essay, Arthur Ray's "The Northern Great Plains: Pantry of the Northwestern Fur Trade, 1774–1885," written in 1984, highlights the economic importance of the Métis in the transient Aboriginal/White culture of the central part of the North American continent at a crucial time in its history. It is followed by "The Twatt Family, 1780–1840: Amerindian, Ethnic Category, or Ethnic Group Identity?," authored by Paul Thistle (1997) and which examines early problems of identity among mixed-descent people, focusing this time on the lower Saskatchewan River region, on the margins of the Great Plains.

The fifth article of this collection, "Wintering, the Outsider Adult Male and the Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis," by John Foster (1994), traces the origins of the latter group to the practices of wintering in the late 18th century and the transformation of the *engagé* into a freeman. It is followed by Thomas Flanagan's "The Market for Métis Lands in Manitoba: An Exploratory Study" (1991), which disputes the claim that the Métis of Assiniboia were dispossessed by the government and argues that they made every effort to adapt to and exploit a market which, contrary to common belief, they actually understood. On the heels of which article we naturally had to place its rebuttal: "Dispossession vs. Accommodation in Plaintiff vs. Defendant Accounts of Métis Dispersal from Manitoba, 1870–1881," by D.N. Sprague (1991), a major proponent of the dispossession thesis. The

controversy had begun with "Métis Land Claims at St. Laurent: Old Arguments and New Evidence," an article written earlier (1987) by Thomas Flanagan, which discussed the interpretation of the relations between Ottawa and the Métis on the eve of the 1885 rebellion, and which is included here. And for good measure we have included "Thomas Scott and the Daughter of Time," by J.M. Bumsted (1998), a provoking reassessment of the character of a man whose innate villainy had never before been seriously challenged.

The tenth article, Manfred Mossmann's "The Charismatic Pattern: Canada's Riel Rebellion of 1885 as a Millenarian Protest Movement" (1985), puts the events of 1885 into a global context and reinterprets them as a prophet-inspired movement similar to others that took place in India, Burma, New Zealand and Brazil. There follows "Louis Riel and Sitting Bull's Sioux: Three Lost Letters," by David McCrady (2007). These three unpublished letters were addressed by the Métis leader to Lieutenant Colonel Henry Moore Black, commanding officer at Fort Assiniboine, in March 1880. They throw an unusual light on the American side of Riel's life, at a time when he very much identified with the Montana Métis and was trying to protect their interests by encouraging the Sioux to surrender to American authorities, thereby ridding the shrinking local hunting grounds of unwanted interlopers. The part that Riel played later in the Resistance was therefore supposed to be a mere interlude in a life otherwise focused on the United States. He intended to be back there by September of 1884 and, as McCrady remarks, "there is no reason not to believe him."

The twelfth essay of this collection, written by Walter Hildebrandt in 1985, naturally concerns "The Battle of Batoche": the events leading up to it, the military strategy of the Métis, and various details and episodes which influenced the outcome of this pivotal battle, including the *Northcote* incident and the presence of a Gatling gun. The last essay, "Another Father of Confederation?," by Allen Ronaghan (1999), argues that Louis Riel should be put squarely at the forefront of those who created Canada, thereby illustrating the polarization which has always characterized the exchange of educated opinions concerning Riel. As Charlotte Gray (2004: 405) remarks,

Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald couldn't wait to get rid of him, regardless of the cost to Anglo-French relations:

"He shall hang though every dog in Quebec bark in his favour," he is said to have snapped.

More recently, Riel has been touted as a prototype defender of First Nations people within an increasingly racist society

and as an early advocate of western interests against a rapacious central Canada. In the 1960s, he morphed into a sort of Prairies Che Guevara, fighting for the simple life against a capitalist onslaught from the east.

The reader will thus have in handy format a broad panorama of the Western Métis as treated over a quarter of a century in the pages of *Prairie Forum*: their genesis and identity, their population movements and interbreeding patterns, their historical importance and military prowess, and finally their political successes and failures.

