

6. Wintering, the Outsider Adult Male and the Ethnogenesis of the Western Plains Métis (1994)

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For some fur trade employees, wintering provided an opportunity to engage in profitable manly activities. Ideally they would make trading contacts with Indian groups, forge marriage alliances, and enjoy the status and prestige accruing to freemen. Duly enculturated, their children would in time become cultural brokers in a local system of obligations serving the needs of both parental groups as well as their own Métis interests.

Over the past half-century the historical assessment of the 19th-century Plains Métis experience has altered from that of “losers” to that of “winners.” The appearance of *les hivernants* (winterers) on the western Plains in the 1840s was, for Marcel Giraud, evidence that “primitivism” had won out over “civilization” in the lives of many of the Plains Métis.¹ More recently, for Gerhard Ens, the same evidence suggests a highly effective entrepreneurial response to an industrial market opportunity.² With the emergence of this scholarly reassessment historians have exhibited heightened interest in the fate of the Métis with the onset of settlement in the last decades of the 19th century. Métis primitivism is no longer an acceptable explanation for the marginalization of the Métis in this period. This same historical reassessment has heightened interest as well in the questions of what were, a century earlier, the circumstances and processes which gave rise to the Métis. As scholars have come to appreciate mixed Euro-Canadian and Indian ancestry as simply a biological fact, shared among many individuals who may choose to identify culturally as Indian,³ Métis or Euro-Canadian, their interest has sharpened in terms of the circumstances and processes which constitute Métis ethnogenesis.⁴ No longer are mixed

ancestry and the social circumstances which gave rise to it sufficient explanation for the origins of the Métis on the western Plains.

The context for the processes and social relationships which gave rise to the Plains Métis was wintering as it was practiced by Montreal-based fur traders in the last quarter of the 18th century in *le pays sauvage* (Indian country).⁵ The focal person was the *coureur de dérouine* (itinerant trader) or commis (clerk), the “outsider” from an Indian perspective, who led a trading party seeking to make contact with Indian hunters on their wintering grounds. The process of establishing this trade constituted the first step in the two-step process that gave rise to the Métis. During the first step three critical relationships were formed. The first was the country marriage of the outsider to a prominent woman of the Indian band. The second relationship involved the outsider in a kin relationship with the adult males of the Indian band. And the last relationship involved the *coureur de dérouine* in association with his fellow *engagés* (servants) as comrades and workmates. The shared experiences of these relationships gave expression to the Métis when the outsider with his country wife and family chose to live apart from both the trading post and the Indian band.

L'homme libre, the freeman, looms large in the process of Métis ethnogenesis. His historical importance in part lies in his social ties to indigenous Indian bands who came to consider this outsider as one of themselves. Rarely of British origin, the *Canadien* or “eastern Indian” freeman was a phenomenon of the Montreal-based fur trade and its *en dérouine* (itinerant peddling) system of trade. Usually he was an *engagé* who had established himself as a man of consequence among his fellows. Physical prowess counted for much, but not all; generosity and a penchant for an evocative song and an entertaining story were recognized as well. The man of consequence influenced others and affected the image of being less influenced by others. The man of consequence acted to become a “master” of his own affairs and circumstances. The logic of this ethos among the fur trade *engagés* led some to end their relationship with the trading post as *engagés* and become *les hommes libres*. This means of expressing their sense of consequence, by becoming free, was the beginning of the second stage in a two-step process which was intimately and critically involved in the emergence of the Plains Métis.

Particular behaviours distinguish the historical Plains Métis from indigenous Indians and from Euro-Canadians. The nature of these distinguishable behaviours in significant measure may well be “degree” rather than “kind.” Further, such behaviours can be said to be central to the culture of these people. To explain their cultural origins it is useful to acknowledge

the enculturation of children as a fundamental mechanism in the transmission of culture generationally. Thus the critical feature in explaining Métis ethnogenesis is not mixed ancestry; rather, it is the historical circumstances and processes which saw some children enculturated differently than those children associated with Indian bands or with the very few Euro-Canadian communities that could be said to exist in the presettlement West. Few would quarrel with the observation that children born to Indian mothers and enculturated in Indian bands did, and do, function culturally as Indians. In the closing decades of the 18th century on the western Plains there were only Indian mothers. Thus to have some children experience a different enculturation, to the extent that the historical actors themselves recognized them as culturally distinct from Indians, it is necessary to posit an enculturation circumstance for these children apart from indigenous Indian bands. The freeman, the outsider adult male, was a critical factor in creating these historical circumstances.

Two scholars in particular have offered insight in this area. Jacqueline Peterson, in her article "Prelude to Red River: A Social Portrait of the Great Lakes Métis," details an historical mechanism which would see some children enculturated in circumstances apart from an Indian band.⁶ Her focus is the early 18th-century Great Lakes fur trade and the small party of traders dispatched *en déroutine* by a *bourgeois* (merchant) at a major trading post.⁷ The trading party of perhaps four to six men, led by a *commis*, sought out Indian bands on their home territories. Frequently the basis for a commercial trade between the two was a sociopolitical tie linking the traders, particularly the *commis*, to the principal adult males of the band. The vehicle for such a relationship in most instances was the "country marriage" of the *commis* and a principal woman in the band. Peterson goes on to suggest that should the *commis* enjoy success, emerging in time as a *bourgeois* and contracting a more enduring marriage from his own social circle, he could still gather some of the children of his previous country marriages to be raised in his own home circumstances. Peterson's article argues that sufficient experiences of this nature over two or three generations contributed significantly to the rise of the Great Lakes Métis. In terms of the western Plains, the immediate question arising from Peterson's article is whether a similar process can be identified which would have some children enculturated, as were some children of the *commis*, in circumstances distinct from Indian bands.

Jennifer Brown, in her book *Strangers in Blood*, offers the concept of patri-focality to explain why most children in the families of fur trade officers and their Native wives in the 19th century did not emerge as Métis.⁸ Brown argues that the dominant position of fur trade officers in their families

allowed them to influence the enculturation of their children to the extent that they did not become Métis. An implication for readers of Brown's book is whether matrifocality rather than patrifocality would explain the appearance of the Métis. Were the Métis the cultural product of children enculturated apart from the band in a family in which the wife and mother was the dominant factor in their enculturation? In part Brown returned to this discussion in a later article, "Woman as Centre and Symbol in the Emergence of Métis Communities."⁹

The historical record argues persuasively for the significance of the outsider male in the historical processes that gave rise to the Métis. Further, a noteworthy number of these males would appear to be characterized as assertive in terms of their behaviour with others. An example is Jean Dumont, the founder of the Dumont family among the Métis in western Canada. Having "turned off" his country wife, Suzette, the Sarcee-Crow woman, and family to another freeman, Paul Durand, Jean left for Lower Canada in 1802, only to return two or three years later to challenge Durand for his family: "mais Paul Durant [*sic*] refusait de rendre la femme a son premier propriétaire, Jean Dumont dut la prendre de irve force."¹⁰ Durand's name would disappear from documents until his son by Suzette reached maturity and married. Quite possibly a similar assertiveness expressed itself in the family lives of these men and in their relations with their children, particularly sons. Whether or not such assertiveness in family life constituted "patrifocality" or "man centrality," it does argue for significance in terms of the circumstances in which the young in such families were enculturated. Arguing the importance of the husband and father in proto-Métis households is not to imply the unimportance of the wife and mother.

In attempting to identify the particular historical circumstances and processes which gave rise to the western Plains Métis attention is directed to the wintering villages which first captured Giraud's attention.¹¹ Within a generation of their first appearance, numbers of these villages dotted the western Plains. Among the most westerly was Buffalo Lake in what is today the province of Alberta. At its height as a wintering village of Métis buffalo hunters it had over eighty cabins, numbering close to 1,000 inhabitants.¹² It is to wintering in the fur trade, not in the 1870s, however, but in the 1770s that scholars must look to identify the circumstances and the processes which gave rise to the Métis on the western Plains.

Wintering in its broadest sense is the complex of individual and community behaviours invoked in response to factors rooted in climatic circumstances. The behaviours are those necessary for survival when on occasion a benign or challenging environment can become threatening. But wintering

behaviours involve more than simple survival: they involve the full interplay of individuals and groups in small, face-to-face communities. In the context of the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes fur trade in the 18th century, wintering differentiated *les bons hommes* who wintered in the interior from *les mangeurs de lard* who bound themselves to the constraints of society in the environs of Montreal and elsewhere in French Canada.¹³ Those *engagés* who remained in the interior were *les hivernants*. They met the challenge of wintering in the Indian country, not simply by surviving but by becoming persons of consequence among their fellows and in the Indian bands. Thereby they gained reputation and full entry into the adult male fraternity of the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes fur trade. For the officers wintering was the prerequisite, after appropriate social circumstances, for membership in the famous, and at times infamous, Beaver Club.¹⁴ Others of their social and ethnic milieu could be guests at the club's functions, but only winterers of appropriate social circumstances could be members. For those officers and servants in posts in the North Saskatchewan River valley, in the last quarter of the 18th century, *hivernement* (wintering) had an even more specialized meaning.

While the discussion of the circumstances and processes of wintering is sparse in the fur trade literature, it is noteworthy that Giraud provides the most detail. The image of wintering that emerges in Giraud suggests two cardinal factors determining circumstances. The first factor is the *en dérrouine* trading system, developed in the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes trade during the closing decades of the 17th century.¹⁵ Jacqueline Peterson has explained that the system involved small parties of men sent from a regional trading fort to trade with Indians on their home hunting and trapping territories. These peddlers would find winter a most appropriate time for their travel not only because the season facilitated travel in areas away from canoe-navigable rivers, but because it would be the best circumstance in which to encourage Indians to emphasize trapping activities. Giraud explains:

the employees of the Canadian companies, as soon as they reached their wintering places, provided themselves with trade goods and scattered among the Indians in the hope of securing their furs and gaining their allegiance through the mutual sympathy that was born of such a shared experience. ... the Canadians already had recourse to this procedure, which they found to their advantage as well as to that of the Indians. ... The "coureur de dérrouine," as such an employee-trader was called, became the essential cogwheel in the trading post. Many of the Canadians shared ... the

life of the natives, choosing to live over winter in their tents, next to their families, without caring about the rigorous cold or the uncomfortable quarters. ... such a dispersion might have an added importance of conserving the fort's scanty resources of food.¹⁶

In effect, wintering in the posts of the *en dérrouine* fur trade system involved travel to the Indian bands and some period of residence among them.

The practice of *en dérrouine* trading in winter provided the bourgeois of the trading post with a means of addressing the perennial problem of the cost of surplus labour during the winter months.¹⁷ *Engagés* were hired primarily to transport trade goods into the interior and furs out to market. With winter this labour force had to be directed towards other activities. Those *engagés* with crafts such as carpentry and smithing could be profitably employed in most instances. Others less technically skilled could be directed for a time to such activities as cutting firewood. As extensive as this activity might be during a Plains winter the usual course of action was to have as much wood as possible cut, transported and stacked before the onset of cold weather. In effect a number of *engagés* could be relatively idle for extended periods during the winter months; and thus, they would be a drain on the post's stores of provisions and, of course, on the profitability of the trade. While hunting activity could be encouraged for a few appropriately skilled servants, it could be cost effective as well to dispatch small parties of men with a limited supply of trade goods to winter with residential bands of Indians. Their trade goods would permit them to exchange goods for food and other necessities from the Indians. In effect the *en dérrouine* system could be combined with the practice of encouraging small parties of men to winter with the bands. Such parties could encourage the bands to act in a manner that favoured their home fort. In competitive circumstances they could direct furs and provisions to their *bourgeois* at the trading post. At the same time they would provision themselves through their own efforts and/or through the efforts of the band with whom they were temporarily residing.

Such wintering practices involved *engagés* intimately in the affairs of the band. On first contact the leader of the trading party would lay the basis for a trading relationship, using all of his social and political skills and his knowledge of Indian ways. In most instances his actions could be described as an "assertive bonhomie" in which gifts were offered and conversation would introduce the names of personages who could be said to offer a link between the *commis* and the adult males of the band.¹⁸ As with many cultural traditions, hunting Indians seemed to have preferred conducting trade with "family." The trader would emphasize conversations that would serve

to have him considered in this context. Preferably a common kinsman would be discovered in the course of conversation. In the early period both parties would have to be satisfied with a social link to an Indian or trader of well-deserved reputation. It was out of a successful initial meeting that a social relationship could emerge between the *coureur de dérrouine* or *commis* and the adults of the band. A country marriage to an eligible woman of the band would cement this relationship. Although evidence is very sparse, other circumstances at a later date suggest that women of the band were not necessarily simply passive observers in this decision.¹⁹

Other members of the *en dérrouine* party might form marriage relationships with women of the band; but the continuation of these relationships in succeeding winter seasons was far more problematic. Members of the trading party other than the *commis* would be much less likely to have the status that would keep the country wife's interest when the winter and the trade ended. Similarly the *engagé*, should he have the inclination, would be less able than the *commis* to persuade his *bourgeois* to allow him in succeeding winters to return to the band of the previous year's country wife. The country marriages which led to the Métis appear in large measure to be those that were sustained over several trading seasons.

The country marriage was critical to the *commis*'s trading success because it included him in the social system of the residential band. Kinship determined appropriate privileges and responsibilities in relations with others. By virtue of his marriage the *commis* was enmeshed in this social system. Every person in the residential band and in the surrounding "neighbourhood" was a "parent" (relative) who owed him obligations and to whom he owed obligations. A failure to behave appropriately in this area could be fatal to a *commis*'s commercial interests and, in some instances, to himself and his compatriots.²⁰ The advice of a country wife on this subject as well as others could be critical to the long-term success and health of the *commis* and his compatriots.

At first glance the spousal relationship involved in wintering suggests "bride service," that is, the newly married couple living with the bride's parents until the birth of the first child. The advantages for the males involved in this practice were the opportunity for the outsider male to learn a new hunting and trapping territory under the skilled tutelage of the bride's male relatives, and the opportunity for the males of the band to acquire an ally who could further their economic and political interests. The advantages for the bride were equally obvious. The new "country husband's" skills as a "provider" could be evaluated while she was still close to the bosom of her natal family. No doubt for many young brides the birth of a first child

among female relatives in whom she had confidence was far more preferable than a birthing experience away from her kinswomen. Should the outsider male be found wanting either as a provider or as a work mate and ally of her kinsmen, the spousal relationship could be terminated. On the other hand, relationships which emerged and endured over the course of several winters could be said to have some depth and stability.

The gender-based roles and skills of the woman in the freeman family were crucial to its survival and success. Perhaps as critical as this spousal relationship was the relationship between the outsider adult male and his country wife's male relatives. In point of fact the two relationships were intertwined. A spousal relationship with a woman of consequence which was established in intimate association with the band required her relatives to accept the outsider country husband as a kinsman. Such an acceptance would always be conditional on the outsider's appropriate behaviour towards his wife's kin. In time, instances of genuine affection between the outside male and his "in-laws" could emerge. In most instances the relationship no doubt remained somewhat formal and distant. The lack of harmony in some instances may have led to violence.²¹ For the successful freeman and his family, however, the essential requirement accompanying a country wife was the acceptance of his presence by her kinsmen and their neighbouring connections. The tragic fate of the twelve Iroquois and two *Canadien* freemen who journeyed to Chesterfield House in the autumn of 1801 is clear testimony to the sociopolitical understandings that were necessary for survival.²² The fourteen were a trapping party hoping to base themselves at Chesterfield House near the confluence of the Red Deer and South Saskatchewan rivers, when they were set upon by Atsina, sometimes known as Gros Ventres, who viewed them as interlopers.

A critically important relationship in the emergence of the Métis was that involving two or three outsider males. With the adult males of this wintering group functioning as hunting, trapping and fishing work mates and partners for extended periods of the year, their families came to constitute a social milieu in which the succeeding generation would choose marriage partners. A perusal of some freeman genealogies demonstrates that individuals did marry into indigenous Indian bands, but the large majority in most regions would appear to have taken spouses from other freeman families and bands.²³ It is noteworthy that the families of freemen who failed to form these work mate partnerships became part of the indigenous Indian tradition. Two particular examples are George Sutherland, said to be the founder of the Willow People among the Down-River Plains Cree, and Alexis[?] Piché, the progenitor of several prominent families among the Rocky Mountain-

Beaver Hills People of the Up-River Plains Cree.²⁴ Without the relationship with other outsider males a winterer and his household might well enjoy success, but the generational legacy in the 19th century would be overwhelmingly in an Indian, not a Métis, tradition.

Among the distinguishing behaviours of some freemen descendants in the North Saskatchewan River valley was the practice of a "folk" Roman Catholicism which predated the appearance of Roman Catholic missionaries by more than half a century.²⁵ Roman Catholic missionaries after 1840 encountered infant baptism and Roman Catholic prayer among Native laity who had had no previous experience with church-sanctioned religious instruction. Such practices originated in an earlier generation of work mates who sustained some behaviours of the community of their origin, Lower Canada. They were shared among families who shared similar progenitors. In time some of these families would become distinct communities. In terms of ethnogenesis the work mate or outsider male relationship was as important as the other two relationships.

The cultural significance of the processes involved in the three relationships of the first step should not be underestimated. If these processes are ethnogenesis, what then is the relationship between particular experiences in wintering and the emergence of the Métis as a distinct sociocultural entity in the fur trade West? The anthropologist Fredrick Barth suggests a useful "model" to depict the interconnection of behaviour and culture:

The simplest form of this interconnection would seem to depend on sharing: individual behaviour produces experience, a confrontation with reality which may or may not seem consistent with pre-existing conceptualizations and thus may sometimes tend to confirm, sometimes falsify them. If a number of persons in communication share a similar opportunity situation, experience the same confrontations with reality, and have the same conceptualizations falsified, one would expect them to develop shared understandings and modify their collective culture and expectations in accordance with this.²⁶

The shared experiences in wintering were the behaviours involved in establishing the three critical relationships: the country marriage between an outsider male and an Indian woman of the band, the sociopolitical alliance relating the outsider male to the male kinsmen of the woman and the friendship that bound outsider males in an economic and social relationship. All of these relationships and the experiences that engendered them and the

experiences that they in turn engendered constituted the first stage in the two-stage process of Plains Métis ethnogenesis.

While Giraud's description of the factors determining the circumstances of wintering appears to be clear, the historian will find the process of wintering far more problematic. Brief references to particular activities at the trading post can be found in the various trading post journals. But life outside the trading post in the wintering bands is much more dimly perceived. In order to garner some insight into this experience, the first of two stages in the ethnogenesis of the Plains Métis, it is necessary to examine the second stage, the time when the Métis were emerging as a distinct cultural entity.

The opportunity of going free or becoming a freeman was not an option that would be available to many *engagés*. Most would lack the technical and sociopolitical skills necessary for survival. Not only would a freeman have to know how to hunt, fish and trap successfully while living apart from the fort and the Indian band, but he would require the sociopolitical skills necessary to have the surrounding bands view him as one of themselves in so far as the resources of the region were concerned. Strangers were interlopers who were not tolerated. Such survival skills were acquired over time and required appropriate circumstances for their expression. For several "eastern Indians" who had been hired by the Montreal-based fur trade companies and who were numerous in the Athabasca country, particularly the Lesser Slave Lake and Jasper House neighbourhoods, freeman status proved to be a quick and natural process.²⁷ Their skills as hunters and trappers and their ability to achieve acceptance on the part of neighbouring Indians suggested they would be more profitable to the fur trade as free trappers and hunters rather than as contracted servants. Similarly, Euro-Canadian servants who contemplated freeman status would have to have the necessary skills to function as a hunter and/or a trapper and to negotiate acceptance on the part of neighbouring Indians.

A critical factor in the transition from *engagé* to freeman was motivation. Elsewhere I have argued the existence of an adult male ethos among French Canadian males of this era that emphasized the necessity of being a man of consequence in one's own eyes and in the eyes of one's fellows.²⁸ A most dramatic expression of this sense of consequence is found in Alexander Ross's familiar account of the words of an old *engagé* whom Ross met in 1825 *en route* to the Red River Settlement:

I have now been forty-two years in this country. For twenty-four I was a light canoe man. ... No portage was too long for me; all portages were alike. My end of the canoe never touched the ground till I saw the end of [the portage]. ...

Fifty songs a day were nothing to me, I could carry, paddle, walk and sing with any man I ever saw. ... No water, no weather, ever stopped the paddle or the song. I have had twelve wives in the country; and was once possessed of fifty horses, and six running dogs, trimmed in the first style. I was then like a Bourgeois, rich and happy; no Bourgeois had better dressed wives than I; no Indian chief finer horses; no white man better harnessed or swifter dogs. ... I wanted for nothing; ... I should glory in commencing the same career again. I would spend another half-century in the same fields of enjoyment. There is no life so happy as a voyageur's life; none so independent; no place where a man enjoys so much variety and freedom as in the Indian country.²⁹

Enduring status as a lowly *engagé* was incompatible with the ethos of a man of consequence. The expression of such an ethos in *le pays sauvage* required in time promotion, possibly to the rank and status of interpreter, and subsequently for some, freeman status. Others might become freemen earlier in their careers. It would appear that a similar if not identical ethos influenced those eastern Indians who chose to remain in the West to live as freemen. It is the existence of such an ethos which may well explain, in significant part, why the majority of freemen chose to live apart from indigenous Indian bands. Some of the particulars of their sense of a man of consequence would not be shared with the males of the indigenous Indian bands. While each could acknowledge kinship with the other, their respective expressions of consequence limited the time that they and their families could spend in each other's company. A successful freeman as well as his "in-laws" may well have understood the limits of each other's tolerance of "different" behaviours. Living apart from kinsmen for significant periods could well have been an important element in a successful freeman's repertoire of behaviours. In living with his family apart from the Indian band and the trading post, the freeman laid the basis for his children to be enculturated in circumstances distinct from that of the band or the post. The process of enculturation in such circumstances was the second stage of a two-stage process which gave rise to the Plains Métis.

Wintering in the fur trade in the valley of the North Saskatchewan River and its tributaries in the latter decades of the 18th century was the basic context in which, for some Métis, processes of Métis ethnogenesis began. In all probability similar experiences marked behaviour in the valleys of the Red, Assiniboine and Athabasca rivers. The *en dérrouine* trading tradition and the *bourgeois's* interest in controlling labour costs were the twin wintering

factors that encouraged the formation of the three essential relationships. These relationships in turn were critical to the success of the freeman and his family or, if you will, the proto-Métis. The first and foremost of these relationships was the country marriage between the servant, who by virtue of reputation and favour led the *en dérrouine* party, and an Indian woman closely related to the prominent males of the band.³⁰ The second critical relationship was that between the leader of the *en dérrouine* party, and the adult males of the band. Resting upon the marriage relationship with the Indian woman, the relationship with the males of the band would determine the level of acceptance extended to the outsider. For purposes of exploiting the resources of the region it was essential that adult Indian males view the outsider as one of themselves. The third critical relationship that would see the freeman's family emerge distinct from the Indians was the relationship formed among some of the members of the *en dérrouine* party. While examples can be found of freemen and their families living with Indian bands, the overwhelming impression from the sources emphasizes freeman families neighbouring with each other for extended periods of the year.³¹ Such second-stage associations suggest friendships built up over time, dating from a period when circumstances encouraged close cooperation among some outsiders. While such associations reflected mutual self-interest in terms of economic activities, they also reflected the freeman's preference for those with whom he shared a similar ethos and all that such sharing entailed.

The second stage in the process of Métis ethnogenesis in the Saskatchewan country emerged with the decision of the experienced *engagé* to become a freeman. With the support of his *bourgeois* who encouraged his pursuit of the material markers of consequence, the freeman claimed his family from the band or possibly the fort and began his assiduous pursuit of provisions and furs in surplus amounts. His ethos and the behaviour that manifested it made him and his family distinct from the indigenous Indians. He naturally grouped with those who suggested compatibility with his ways. With the marriage of his children to the children of other freeman families and with their pursuit of his ways, the process of Métis ethnogenesis on the western Plains, as early as the first quarter of the 19th century, was complete.

Gabriel Dumont the elder, the eldest son of Jean Dumont and Suzette, the Sarcee-Crow woman, witnessed the Métis of the upper North Saskatchewan becoming a community. He married Suzanne Lussier, the daughter of freeman Francois Lussier, the subject of a Paul Kane portrait. Members of his extended family were residing at Lac Ste-Anne when the Roman Catholic missionary Reverend J. Thibault visited there in the 1840s. In 1861 some

followed the mission to Big Lake (St-Albert), a few miles north of Fort Edmonton. Already the Métis of the region were responding to the opportunities becoming apparent in the buffalo robe trade. From their base at St-Albert the Métis hunted south and southeast through the parkland to the prairie. In the 1870s at Buffalo Lake they established one of the largest *hivernement* villages. The husband of a granddaughter, Louison Montagnais, became the principal *Chef Métis* in the village. Kinsmen from the lower South Saskatchewan River at *Petite Ville* (ancestral to the village of Batoche) joined them at Buffalo Lake some winters. Dumont himself witnessed the demise of the village when the robe hunt swept southward and the resource on which it was based collapsed.³² An aged patriarch at the time of his death in 1880, he was finally laid to rest a few miles south of Buffalo Lake on a bluff overlooking another wintering village site at the confluence of Tail Creek and Red Deer River. In his lifetime he would have witnessed the events that marked the processes that constituted the birth of a people.

The foregoing analysis has focussed on the outsider adult male in the circumstances and processes of becoming western Plains Métis. In this process no single act has more consequence than the individual *engagé's* decision to go free. The action is a powerful statement of self-definition and self-assertion. In this light concepts of partifocality and male centrality suggest explanative insight into which freeman families would succeed as Métis. The bias of the historical sources themselves encourages this focus. What remains to be addressed in more detail is the nature and consequence of the wife and mother from the indigenous Indian band in the process of Métis ethnogenesis.

