

2. The Métis: the People and the Term (1978)

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From "Iroquois" to "English Halfbreeds," the Canadian Métis have been notoriously difficult to categorize. One step towards clarification consists in distinguishing two fur trade traditions: the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes and the Hudson Bay systems. A second step consists in understanding that historically the names given the Métis first characterized a way of life, and then took on socially or racially prejudiced overtones.

In the Canadian West much confusion surrounds the use of the term "Métis." While scholars and laymen alike agree that the term refers to persons of mixed Indian and Euro-Canadian ancestry, it is difficult to obtain a more precise definition. "Métis" can refer to individuals and communities who derive some of their cultural practices from non-Indian native communities whose origins lie in the pre-1870 West. In other instances, the term is used to refer to individuals whose circumstances of birth suggest "Métis" as preferable to the frequently pejorative term, "Halfbreed." On occasion, the term also encompasses non-status Indians. Thus, in one circumstance, the term conveys a sense of cultural identity and, in another, a quasi-legal status. Perhaps the most useful view of the term today is as a label identifying a segment of western society which, in addition to recognizing an ancestry of mixed Indian and Euro-Canadian origins, seeks to realize various interests through particular political goals and actions. It is possible that such Métis political activity will lead to a Métis cultural cohesiveness not now evident.¹ Even without such a development, significant questions emerge as to the cultural links between the 19th-century Métis and those to whom the term refers today. In essence such questions are problems in historical understanding.

Confusion in the use of the term “Métis” is not new; it existed prior to 1870. There would appear to be agreement on what might be termed the classical image of the Métis as conveyed in some of Paul Kane’s paintings² and Alexander Ross’s writings.³ The French-speaking, Roman Catholic, non-Indian native buffalo hunters of the Red River Settlement emerged distinct from the socio-cultural mosaic of the period and the region. As these people constituted Louis Riel’s following (a principal reason for Canadian interest in their history), there seems to be some justification for labelling them as a distinct entity. Yet, problems in terminology emerge after a short perusal of the literature. What of the other non-Indian native peoples of the pre-1870 West who did not fit the “classical” image of the Métis? After the 1840s, what of the English-speaking, Protestant, buffalo hunters of Portage la Prairie, Prince Albert and Fort Victoria east of Fort Edmonton?⁴ Did not their mixed Indian and Euro-Canadian ancestry as well as their way of life qualify them as Métis in spite of their predilection for the English tongue and Protestant Churchmen? And what of others? The French and Saukteaux speaking, Roman Catholic voyageur-farmers in Red River and their neighbours, the English-speaking, Protestant farmer-tripmen and occasional merchants—could they be considered “Métis”?⁵ The French and Cree-speaking, Roman Catholic, buffalo hunters of the North Saskatchewan river valley would appear to fit the “classical” image of the Métis with ease.⁶ But, what of their neighbours to the north in the valleys of the Peace and Athabasca Rivers, the Cree-speaking, Roman Catholic, “Iroquois” trapper-hunters?⁷ Many of their descendants would demand halfbreed scrip rather than treaty status at the Treaty Eight signings in 1899.⁸ Were these people Indians, Métis or...? In attempting to answer these questions writers have chosen a variety of terms to describe people of mixed ancestry who were not considered to be Indians.

Most writers dealing with the pre-1870 West accept the existence of two recognizable entities of mixed ancestry. The Métis, occasionally styled the *Bois Brulés* or *Chicot*,⁹ provoke little debate although it is not always clear to whom the term applies. It is the “British” and “Protestant” segment as opposed to the “French” and “Catholic” part of the mixed-blood population which appears to provide most of the difficulties. The term “Halfbreed” is used in a similar way to the term “Métis,” capitalized and uncapitalized.¹⁰ But, it is apparent that the term can apply to both collectivities as well. Scots Halfbreeds, English Métis and Métis *écossais* are other favourites. More recent additions have included “Country-born” and “Rupert’slander.”¹¹ The confusion surrounding some of the terms suggests that some writers have an inadequate understanding of the times and regions in which some of the terms flourished and to whom they applied.

Reflecting their own cultural antecedents and the traditions of interpretation in their discipline, historians studying the pre-1870 West have tended to emphasize a metropolitan perspective in viewing the passage of events. Whether it is Paris or London, Montreal or, near the end of the period, Toronto, the extension of metropolitan influence and control for purposes of resource exploitation is viewed empathetically.¹² The interests of the populations of these centres and more frequently the interests of their agents in the hinterland are central to the historian's narrative. The primary sources themselves heighten the sense of the predominance of metropolitan interests because these documents were the creations of the agents of metropolitan centres. While amenable to analysis from a hinterland perspective, most of the documents lend themselves more readily to an analysis of processes central to metropolitan concerns. The value of this approach is evident in the sophisticated and sensitive analysis of the actions of men and institutions whose cultural ties lay with the distant homeland.¹³ Too frequently these same subjects can suffer from superficial analysis and dehumanizing assessment in other disciplinary approaches. Yet in historical analysis the narrative too often shifts its focus when the interests of the metropolis no longer hold sway. To obtain an acceptable historical understanding of the pre-1870 West, historians must attempt to perceive hinterland happenings in terms of a hinterland perspective as well as the traditional metropolitan perspective. One without the other is inadequate.

A basic premise in elaborating a hinterland perspective for the pre-1870 West is that the importance of the fur trade lay as much in the changing ways of life of the participants as it did in the commercial and political processes by which the metropolis extended and elaborated its interests in the hinterland. From a hinterland perspective, the appearance of agents from the different metropolitan centres introduced not only new material goods but new social elements into Western society. In adapting their ways to new realities, the newcomers and their goods stimulated Indian responses whose particular nature was determined by their cultural antecedents and fur trade roles such as Home Guard-provisioners, middleman-traders and trappers.¹⁴ Over time, the particular nature of influences emanating from specific metropolitan centres left distinctive cultural legacies. As these legacies were incorporated in the various ways of life of the participants in each of the two trading systems, they created two distinct fur trade traditions.

For French mercantilists in the early modern period, commerce was a key means of enhancing the interests of the French state.¹⁵ Thus, the Government of Louis XIV saw the fur trading system of the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes region as a tool of imperial expansion rather than a reason for it. Fur trade

alliances with Indian bands were the means of extending French influence into the interior of the North American continent and denying its resources to European rivals. Diplomacy and the military as much as the market-place furnished the skills necessary for survival in the St. Lawrence trading system.¹⁶ After the Conquest, the British, as evidenced in Pontiac's uprising in 1763, abandoned French practices at their peril. The emergence of a hostile United States of America to the south of the Great Lakes in the closing decades of the 18th century emphasized, in the mind of British colonial authorities, the necessity of adopting the French practice of establishing politico-military alliances with Indian bands.¹⁷ Such alliances depended upon the exchange of furs for European goods. The success of French practice, which rested as much on the social ties of kinship as it did on political and economic interests,¹⁸ led the Highland Scots, who succeeded to the control of the St. Lawrence fur trade system at Montreal, to think more in terms of elaboration rather than replacement when adapting their traditions to the legacy of *Canadien* ways.¹⁹ In this trading system, of course, both the Indian and the Euro-Canadian faced the continuing challenge of adapting traditions to changing realities. The coherence of the process evolved what can be termed a St. Lawrence fur trade tradition. Central to this tradition and of crucial importance to both Indians and Euro-Canadians was the "Indian trader."

With the destruction of Huronia at the hands of the Iroquois in 1649–50, the French on the St. Lawrence had to exercise increasing control over the conduct of the fur trade if their alliance system was to survive. To this end the *coureur de bois* emerged.²⁰ Reflecting the military, diplomatic and merchant-adventuring skills of their heritage they established, through marriages and adoptions, the necessary bonds of kinship with Indian bands. Political and commercial activity depended upon such social ties. In time, with specialization and sophistication, the *coureur de bois* gave way to the voyageur on one hand and the commandant-trader on the other.²¹ Critical to the French tradition was the practice of carrying trade goods to the Indian trappers and returning with furs.²² Expeditions from major forts established outposts, and from them parties visited bands in their hunting and trapping grounds. Frequently ties of kinship linked the commandants of major forts, the bourgeois heading the outpost, and the trader who led the *en déroutine* party.²³ For both Euro-Canadians and Indians this latter figure, a kinsman playing a mediational or broker role, was crucial to maintaining the fur trade alliance. In time, most of these brokers were of mixed Indian and Euro-Canadian ancestry.

Jacqueline Peterson, in a timely article, describes a most interesting family survival strategy resting upon "middleman" control of trading

activity in the Great Lakes region.²⁴ A newly arrived trader would undertake a short term “country marriage” with a woman of a prominent family in an Indian band to establish the kinship basis necessary for trading activity. Afterwards, possibly after other country marriages, a more permanent marriage with a *Canadien* woman of mixed Indian and *Canadien* ancestry or simply *Canadien* ancestry would be established. This wife would raise not only her own children but frequently the children of her husband by his “country wives.” Later, some sons would follow in their father’s footsteps and contract alliances with Indian women before undertaking more permanent marriages. Their sisters as well fulfilled a similar role, marrying potential competitors to facilitate “understandings.” Several families appear to have survived the disruption of the Conquest by forming marriage alliances with incoming British traders.²⁵ These traders in turn quickly came to appreciate the advantage that such family ties conveyed in the hectic competition of the fur trade. The broker skills of a brother-in-law of mixed ancestry, leading an *en déroutine* party, were as crucial as British manufactures in achieving a successful trade.

With the founding of the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1670, a second fur trading system came into existence. The Company’s first half-century dictated a strategy termed the “coast-side factory system.”²⁶ This policy was criticized as the “sleep by the frozen sea.”²⁷ The Company did not abandon this policy and move into the interior in strength until the latter quarter of the 18th century. As a result, trade with the Indians of the interior was controlled by Cree and Assiniboine middlemen.²⁸ These trading chiefs filled the broker role for the interior Indians in the Hudson Bay trading system. For the Home Guard Cree bands living in the environs of the coastal factories, however, the goodwill of the post commander was crucial to their interests.²⁹ He was styled “Ukimow” or “patriarch,” a position of pre-eminence in their world. In the trading post among the British-born he occupied the highest social position, received the greatest material benefits, and exercised the most power. To the Home Guard Cree, British-born servants and officers in the trading post, he was the “Indian Trader” in the Hudson Bay tradition.

In each of the fur trade traditions the inhabitants made the basic socio-cultural distinction between Indians and Europeans. The distinction was not one of race; rather, it emphasized ways of life. This is most apparent in the manner in which the inhabitants classified children of mixed European and Indian ancestry.³⁰ In both fur trade traditions the child was associated with the mother and classified socio-culturally with her way of life. If the mother remained with the Indian band the child was an “Indian.” In the Hudson Bay tradition the term “Native” could be used as well, referring, it would

appear, to an "Indian" who had a real or fictive kinship tie with personnel in the trading post. If the mother and child resided in the trading post for an extended period the child was "*Canadien*" or "*Scots*" (Euro-Canadian) in the St. Lawrence tradition, and "English" in the posts of the Hudson's Bay Company.³¹

A circumstance recorded in the York Factory Journals and Account Books in the early 1760s demonstrates how the historical actors viewed themselves and their fellows in the Bay traditions. Two native youths, Robert and Thomas Inksetter, sons of tailor Robert Inksetter who served at the Bottom of the Bay and York Factory from the early 1720s through to the late 1740s, enlisted as servants in the Company's service on five-year contracts.³² In the parlance of the Fort and the surrounding bands they had become English. After two years, the young men requested permission to have wives live with them in the fort.³³ Their request was refused on the grounds that, among the English, only the commanding officer enjoyed this privilege.³⁴ With their Indian heritage allowing them an additional option to those enjoyed by British-born servants, the brothers broke their contracts and left the Fort.³⁵ They undoubtedly lived with bands who continued to trade with the Company and were known by name, but their English names did not survive their departure. As far as the Company's records are concerned, Thomas and Robert Inksetter did not exist after 1761.³⁶ They had ceased being "English" and had become "Indian" or "Native" again.

It was in the St. Lawrence fur trade tradition that a term first emerged distinguishing a socio-cultural entity of mixed Indian and Euro-Canadian ancestry from either the Indian or Euro-Canadian in the West. By the second decade of the 19th century the term "*Métis*" or the English equivalent "*Halfbreed*" identified the newly emerged collectivity.³⁷ It would appear that neither term, at least initially, was meant to be complimentary. "*Halfbreed*" apparently could suggest a child of a morganatic liaison or marriage, while "*Métis*" could suggest "mongrel" rather than "mixed" as is frequently suggested.³⁸ Such terminology, however, did not necessarily indicate low social status for those to whom it applied. Rather, it seems plausible to suggest that such terms initially reflected the resentment of Euro-Canadians who found themselves dependent upon such individuals or more likely unable to effect marriage alliances which would tie such individuals to their interests. It would appear that the derogatory term was soon flaunted in the faces of those who used it by those to whom it referred. "*Métis*" was the term by which some families of mixed ancestry in the St. Lawrence tradition came to identify themselves.

In the region of the Red and Assiniboine River valleys in the first two

decades of the 19th century, a second element, probably related to the first, became associated with the term "Métis." These were the provisioning bands of mixed ancestry who hunted buffalo in the region, and through "recognized hunters"³⁹ supplied pemmican and dried meat to the traders. After 1810, as the North West Company entered the closing decade of fur trade competition challenged by a revitalized and modernizing Hudson's Bay Company, kinsmen as traders to Indian bands or recognized hunters on the plains were critical to any hope of success. It was natural that North West Company officers would encourage these people, the "Métis," to see themselves as the "New Nation" whose interests were threatened by the arrival of the Selkirk settlers and the policies of the Hudson's Bay Company.⁴⁰ The events of the decade, focussing on the Battle of Seven Oaks, June 16, 1815, did not bring success to the North West Company but they caused the Métis to emerge as a self-conscious entity with a sense of a particular past and a particular destiny.

In the decade following the end of the fur trade competition in 1820, numerous families of mixed Indian and Euro-Canadian ancestry in the St. Lawrence tradition journeyed to Red River to join the Métis. As a result, differences amongst the Métis appeared. The pre-eminent elements were the plains hunters and the old trading families. Others functioned as fishermen on the lakes to the north. Still others enlisted as voyageurs on the York boats of the Hudson's Bay Company and on private freighters.⁴¹ In later years some Métis families, including the Riels, took concerted action to emphasize their French and Roman Catholic orientation in contrast to the lifestyles of their neighbours.⁴² As all these elements considered themselves "Métis" in Red River and were considered to be a single collectivity by other communities, the term would appear to be applicable beyond the limits of the Settlement.

The non-Indian native peoples in the St. Lawrence fur trade tradition, hunting buffalo from settlements near the North Saskatchewan river valley, apparently created few problems in being described as Métis. Throughout the half-century before Confederation, individuals and families migrated from the region to Red River and a movement of individuals and families flowed in the opposite direction as well.⁴³ To the north in the valleys of the Peace and Athabasca rivers another distinctive people emerged in the St. Lawrence fur trade tradition. But were they Métis? A number certainly identified themselves as such and do so today.

In the late 1790s, finding the Indians of the Upper Saskatchewan and neighbouring river valleys harvesting furs according to their needs and not the needs of the traders, the North West Company brought into the interior as many as 200 Iroquois, Ottawa, Nipissing and Saukteaux trapper-

voyageurs.⁴⁴ These eastern Indians, amongst whom the Iroquois predominated, had lifestyles that demanded more Euro-Canadian goods than did the Indians resident in the region. Accorded privileges of price, goods and social prestige similar to the trading families in the Great Lakes and Red River regions, the Iroquois radiated outward from Fort Edmonton. South of the Saskatchewan River many died in conflicts with members of the Blackfoot Confederacy. Others soon returned to the East. The remainder, joined by a few *Canadien* freemen, flourished to the north and west. In spite of the tension between them and the Cree and Beaver peoples, the Iroquois were outstandingly successful. Taking wives from amongst the Cree they established the kinship ties that made them effective traders as well as hunters and trappers. The special relationship which they had enjoyed with the North West Company was continued with the Hudson's Bay Company after 1820, although in a somewhat attenuated form.⁴⁵ At the end of the century a number of descendants of these families chose scrip rather than treaty as, in their minds, they were not Indians, but Halfbreeds⁴⁶ or Métis who derived many of their ways from the St. Lawrence fur trading tradition.

In the Hudson Bay tradition in the early years of the 19th century, a term distinguishing a third community, distinct from the "Indians" or "Natives" and the "English" did not arise. In contrast to the St. Lawrence tradition in which the term "Métis" and its English equivalent "Halfbreed" arose, people in the Bay tradition remained "Native" or "English." It is noteworthy that Peter Fidler, a Hudson's Bay Company officer, and one of the first individuals to use the term "Halfbreed" in referring to peoples in the St. Lawrence tradition, did not apply the term to individuals in the Hudson Bay tradition.⁴⁷ Fidler's own children were clearly "English," not "Native" and certainly not "Halfbreeds." After 1820 a number of Hudson Bay "English" (the *Anglais* of the Métis) moved to Red River to become river lot farmers, tripmen in the York boats and private merchants.⁴⁸ They were joined by Hudson Bay Native kinsmen who in some instances joined them as "English." Others were encouraged to join Peguis's band of Saulteaux at the Indian village below the Red River Settlement.⁴⁹ The appearance of officers with British wives in the 1830s created problems of terminology for the Hudson Bay "English."⁵⁰ By the end of the 1840s they no longer saw themselves as English, as evidenced in the strikingly belligerent manner in which a Hudson Bay English Anglican catechist referred to himself as "only Half-an-Englishman."⁵¹ At the same time the term "Halfbreed" was taking on a definition separate from that of the Métis.

The Anglican missionaries who were involved with the Hudson Bay English used three terms to identify them. The term "half-caste" disappeared

after Rev. John West's departure.⁵² "Country-born," to distinguish them from the "Native-born," appeared as early as 1852.⁵³ However, "Halfbreed" was the most frequently encountered term in missionary writings.⁵⁴ This development was unfortunate as the term at the time was taking on racial and cultural connotations of a negative nature. The Hudson Bay English in Red River seem to have been as confused as their observers. Occasional references to "my Countrymen" demonstrate a sense of their distinctiveness from Indians and Métis.⁵⁵ When acting in concert with the Métis they used the term "Halfbreed" to refer to their collective interest.⁵⁶ Yet as mentioned previously, this choice may have indeed been rather unfortunate.

Governor George Simpson of the Hudson's Bay Company's North American operations initially followed the Hudson Bay tradition in the use of the term "Native" to designate individuals of mixed ancestry.⁵⁷ Quite quickly he switched to the use of "Halfbreed," the term originating in the St. Lawrence tradition.⁵⁸ It is readily apparent that Simpson associated the term with individuals of mixed ancestry whose habits of life were at odds with his enthusiasm for "modernism" with its emphasis on efficiency of process, whether commercial or administrative. Simpson could recall Hudson Bay English families such as the Cooks and the Birds, whose concerns with privileges derived from rank and kinship emphasized the particularism that was the principal barrier to efficient process in the fur trade in Rupert's Land.⁵⁹ The Hudson Bay "English" in his experience were the unprogressive opponents of modernism. To Simpson it was obvious that their unsteady habits were functions of their "Indian" ancestry. His "character" book demonstrates clearly that he was biased against individuals of mixed ancestry.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Simpson was too able a modernist to allow his prejudice to interfere with his recognition of demonstrated merit. The career of Chief Factor William Sinclair, Junior, the descendant of an old Hudson Bay English family, is a case in point. It would appear that Simpson simply removed the individual from the category of his prejudice while still retaining his prejudice against "Halfbreeds." To Simpson, Chief Factor William Sinclair, Junior, was an effective officer, not a "Halfbreed."⁶¹ Officers recently arrived from Great Britain shared Simpson's views on "Halfbreeds,"⁶² whose traditionalist ways were seen as antagonistic to the effective and efficient operation of the fur trade. By mid-century it would appear that the term "Halfbreed" had come to encompass all persons of mixed ancestry from both fur trade traditions. Unfortunately, the concept was essentially negative.

The Hudson Bay English apparently never did successfully resolve their problem of creating a term around which they could identify their common interests. They saw themselves as distinct from the Métis.⁶³ Others viewed

them as a socio-cultural element distinct from Métis. In these circumstances, scholars have faced a labelling problem. While a plethora of terms has been used to identify them for purposes of study, no single term has gained wide acceptance. Perhaps in spite of its serious limitations "Red River Halfbreed" may yet emerge as the most useful term to identify this cultural entity.

The same problem does not emerge with the term "Métis." With a conceptual framework that equates a hinterland perspective with a metropolitan perspective, two distinct trading systems, each with its particular tradition, can be seen to emerge. In each tradition the person of mixed ancestry was socio-culturally identified with his way of life, not his biological heritage. Particular historical circumstances saw some individuals, who tended to be of mixed ancestry, emerge as distinct entities. In the Hudson Bay tradition these individuals emerged from Home Guard bands, not the middleman trading bands. In the St. Lawrence tradition it was the trader-broker role which some persons of mixed ancestry controlled. In the Bay tradition, historical circumstances confused the emergence of a clearly identifiable community label. In the St. Lawrence tradition historical circumstances singled out the traders and the provisioning hunters for recognition and exaltation. The events of the decade before the signing of the Deed Poll in 1821 provided the basis for the folk history of the "New Nation." Beyond the limits of the Red and Assiniboine river valleys, the term identified socio-cultural elements derived from the St. Lawrence tradition who functioned as trader-brokers and as provisioners. Thus the hunters of mixed ancestry in the North Saskatchewan river valley, many of whom were more familiar with Cree than French, were Métis as well. Similarly, the "Iroquois" of North Western Alberta were considered a Métis people. It was the trader-broker role and the provisioning role in the St. Lawrence tradition that called forth the existence of the Métis. These same roles would determine the nature of their culture. Elements of that culture survive among some Métis people today.