

## People of Myth, People of History: A Look at Recent Writings on the Metis

Jennifer S.H. Brown

Volume 17, numéro 1, autumn 1987

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad17\\_1rv04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad17_1rv04)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Brown, J. S. (1987). People of Myth, People of History:: A Look at Recent Writings on the Metis. *Acadiensis*, 17(1), 150–162.

prevails within the professariat about what is being done beyond their own ranks. The work of the amateurs is often seriously flawed by lack of discipline and depth in terms of research, organization and analysis. Oversimplification, elitism, an avoidance of controversy and, above all, parochialism, undermine the quality of this literature. On the other hand, university scholars, whose own work often falls short of perfection, should know that the amateurs are not merely regurgitating the obvious or engaging in trivial pursuit. Their publications repeatedly call attention to vital aspects of our past which, till now, have suffered serious neglect. Once this positive element in the work of non-academics is acknowledged, we face questions about how best to promote collaboration between amateur and professional historians. The rewards that this would generate are demonstrated by certain of the books here discussed. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that an enhancement of cooperation will develop spontaneously. But rather than despair, perhaps we can urge the archivists of Atlantic Canada to play the role of catalyst for action which will narrow the gap existing among those exploring the region's past.

DAVID SUTHERLAND

### People of Myth, People of History: A Look at Recent Writings on the Metis

THE YEARS BRACKETING THE CENTENARY OF Batoche and the death of Louis Riel saw the blossoming of a small publishing industry commemorating the events of 1885. Most of the commercial and scholarly presses in Canada, particularly in the West, fielded one or more volumes to mark the occasion. This essay undertakes to sample the feast, to comment on its highly varied fare (from gourmet quality to in some instances half-baked or warmed-over), and to explore some of the issues that these many offerings raise. It is impossible to be exhaustive; the items mentioned are a selection, chosen because of their wide circulation or their importance, and their subjective interest to this particular writer.

Anyone confronting the rapidly expanding literature on the Metis faces some complex questions of identity and definition. On a national level, the Metis have at last been granted legal existence (although not definition) by Canada's constitution (1982), which identified Indians, Inuit, and Metis as the aboriginal peoples of Canada. The term, however, has been applied in countless different ways, ranging from highly specific to broadly inclusive, since it first attained wide usage as an ethnic category in the early 1800s. The literature continues to reflect that variability, although "Metis" is increasingly generalized in popular writing to all people identifiably of mixed Indian-European descent, sometimes

with little regard to whether they themselves merit or would elect that designation in either social or political terms.<sup>1</sup>

In addressing the matter of identity, an appropriate starting point is to listen to what contemporary Metis thinkers have to say. Secure in their heritage and their view of themselves, Metis writers often see fewer problems with definition than do many who lack their experiences and self-awareness. As Paul Chartrand, who has deep roots in Manitoba's past, puts it, "If you have to ask yourself whether or not you're Metis, then you're not".<sup>2</sup> Emma LaRocque, of Alberta Metis-Cree heritage, recently took up the matter at some length in her essay, "Conversations on Metis Identity". Commenting on Joe Sawchuk's *The Metis of Manitoba: Reformulation of an Ethnic Identity* (Toronto, Peter Martin Associates Ltd., 1978), she criticizes his view that the Metis lack a shared repertoire of cultural markers and rejects the implication that present-day Metis cultivate a spurious ethnic identity for political purposes. Granting that Metis come in many "interesting combinations", she notes that none comes from a cultural vacuum: "The affinity I experience with the Metis across Canada is rooted in history and founded on cultural realities". People change and vary but in doing so, "they do not necessarily lose their identities. People are flexible, adaptive and creative. Culture is what people do together. It is a living and re-creative process".<sup>3</sup>

Metis identity is alive and well in a population of many thousands in Canada and among a growing number of their kin in the United States where, in contrast to Canada, people of mixed descent never attained political or social recognition as a distinct group. Paul Chartrand's point that those who must ask themselves if they are Metis are not, is well taken. But the recent record shows that growing numbers of North Americans in the last 20 years have been asking that question and answering it with a new positivism that has greatly swelled the ranks of those who now identify themselves as Metis. The centenary of Batoche and Riel gave added vitality to a renaissance of Metis historical and political consciousness as many people retraced their roots to Canada's aboriginal and fur trade past. The shared cultural markers of what the Alberta Federation of Metis Settlement Associations [A.F.M.S.A.] has called "Metisism" may vary and often go

- 1 The introduction and several of the authors writing in Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S.H. Brown, eds., *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America* (Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 1985) address questions of terminology and usage from various angles. Several highly problematic applications of the term "Metis" mar Grant MacEwan's biographic compendium, *Metis Makers of History* (Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books, 1981); Jimmy Jock Bird, Captain William Kennedy, Alexander Kennedy Isbister, and Premier John Norquay are all uncritically cast as Metis although both they and their contemporaries would have defined their identities quite differently.
- 2 Paul Chartrand, University of Manitoba, personal communication to Jennifer Brown, 1986.
- 3 "Conversations on Metis Identity", *Prairie Fire*, 7, 1 (1986), pp. 19-24. The same issue contains several items of fiction and book reviews on Metis themes and topics. See also vol. 6, 4 (1985), a special issue of essays, fiction, and book reviews dedicated to the theme, "1885 and After".

unperceived by outsiders.<sup>4</sup> But they have served to sustain and often to reunite people whose roots spread widely and deeply, as strong and interconnected as those of the western prairies' creeping bellflower.

What qualities, values, and outlooks characterize the Metisism of the Canadian West? Growing numbers of Metis and other publications have afforded answers that show some evolution and changes of focus. One of the earliest was A.-H. de Tremaudan's *L'Histoire de la nation metisse*, written in the 1920s and published by L'Union Nationale Metisse St. Joseph du Manitoba in 1936. De Tremaudan, using a variety of rare books, documents, and eye-witness accounts, wrote his history from a viewpoint that reflected his contacts with Louis Riel's circle of relatives and associates in St. Boniface, Manitoba. For himself and for the francophone Metis for whom he spoke, the French and Roman Catholic connections were paramount. In suppressing Riel, Canada had missed the chance for "a French province, a second Quebec" in the West, thus failing to maintain a balance between "the two great races of European civilization". On Metis identity he observed, "if there is none more Catholic than a Metis there is none more French.... In religion he is Catholic; in nationality he is French from head to toe — in mind, heart, word and deed".<sup>5</sup>

De Tremaudan's volume was reprinted in English translation in 1982, three years before the monumental five-volume publication of *The Collected Writings of Louis Riel/Les Ecrits complets de Louis Riel* (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1985), under the general editorship of George F.G. Stanley. Taken together, these works put us more in touch with Riel and his circle than do any other sources. *The Collected Writings*, numbering 2569 pages of text, apparatus, and commentary, make Riel one of the most massively published political figures in Canadian history.<sup>6</sup> They greatly sharpen our focus on the man and his activities, values, and outlooks from his schooldays in Montréal in the early 1860s to his last interviews with visitors in November 1885. They also, as a whole, lend support to de Tremaudan's thesis that the Metisism of Riel was resolutely Catholic and French in orientation. Although committed to defence of Metis autonomy, Riel had high hopes, too, for what a strong Quebec connection would

4 *Metisism: A Canadian Identity* (Edmonton, A.F.M.S.A., 1982).

5 De Tremaudan, *Hold High your Heads*, trans. by Elizabeth Maguet (Winnipeg, Pemmican Publications, 1982), pp. x-xii.

6 The Riel Publication project, controversial for the time and expense that it entailed (it received a major subsidy from the SSHRCC), well repays these investments. The editors in their intensive search for Riel documents assembled four volumes of diverse materials from over 40 Canadian and American sources, producing as definitive an edition as resources allowed. Their fifth volume, *Reference*, includes a history of the project and a discussion of its methodology by G.F.G. Stanley, an essay by Roger Motut on the linguistic usages of Riel and the Metis, and Thomas Flanagan's compilations of Riel's genealogy and chronology, as well as photographs, maps, a biographical index, and a comprehensive bibliography. It is regrettable that the work was printed without running heads and that some pages in volume five have fuzzy print; the set is otherwise handsomely produced.

contribute to a "nation métisse-canadienne-française," in the West, distinct yet dominantly francophone like Quebec itself.<sup>7</sup>

The Metis-Indian connection, in contrast, though acknowledged and cherished as a maternal gift, was muted in Riel's thinking and writing. As Thomas Flanagan writes in his introduction to the Biographical Index of *The Collected Writings*, "Riel's dealings with Indians were marginal to his career" (V, p. 209). For the most part, Indians did not figure in Riel's intellectual universe as persons and groups whom he understood deeply and about whom he could write with knowledge. Rather, they were players in his own distinctive version of Judaeo-Christian theology. A revelation he received in 1876 explained how a group of Jewish slaves on an Egyptian ship became the progenitors of the North American Indians, who thus were not autochthonous in his view. Similarly, Old Testament models seemed more influential than any North American native traditions in structuring his prophetic roles and utterances.<sup>8</sup>

Both de Tremaudan and Riel's *Collected Writings*, in sum, recall us to an older Metisism, rather localized in time and space and clear enough in its linguistic, cultural, and religious orientation to the French side of its heritage, even though Riel's idiosyncratic Catholicism and his role as a religious prophet to the Metis continue to present problems of interpretation.<sup>9</sup> Most other publications to be mentioned here, however, encourage us to broaden the discussion beyond Riel and the francophone Metis of Red River, and to examine the other diversified roots of Metis communities and culture.

First among these, both temporally and in length, is Marcel Giraud's massive two-volume work, *Le Métis canadien: son rôle dans l'histoire des provinces de l'ouest*, published by the Institut d'Ethnologie in Paris in 1945, reprinted in French by Les Editions du Blé (Winnipeg, 1985), and translated with a new introduction by George Woodcock in 1986 as *The Metis in the Canadian West* (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press). Giraud's work, some descriptions to the contrary, is neither definitive nor objective. But for its time (it was finished in 1942), it achieved a far more comprehensive historical view of the Metis than any previous work. Giraud spent relatively few pages on Riel and the events of 1869-70 and 1885. Rather, he followed "The Birth of the Metis Group" from its beginnings in "The Primitive Environment" of the Canadian West with "The Penetration of the White Race" (to quote Woodcock's translations of his titles of Parts I, II, and III). Part IV

7 Raymond Huel, introduction to *Collected Writings*, I, p. xlvii.

8 Flanagan, *Louis 'David' Riel: Prophet of the New World* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 76, 82-3, 159.

9 Besides Flanagan's biography, see Gilles Martel, *Le Messianisme de Louis Riel* (Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984), based on his 1976 doctoral dissertation in sociology for the University of Paris. Martel examines Riel's religious thought and its ramifications for the Metis, "une société traditionnelle en état de crise". The appropriateness of describing the changing and diversified Metis as "traditional" is questionable. J.R. Miller in the *Canadian Historical Review*, 66, 3 (1985), pp. 424-5, also queries how deeply the Metis experienced the influence of Riel's religious thought, a point on which Martel's evidence is unsatisfying.

traced "The Awakening of a National Consciousness", and Part V, "The Mature Phase" (1818-1869). Part VI, "The Disintegration of the Metis as a Group", concluded on a note reminiscent of much of the "vanishing Indian" literature of the early 20th century, although also incorporating some of Giraud's own observations from a trip he made to the Canadian prairies in the 1930s.

Historically, culturally, and in their "mentality", Giraud situated the Metis between the Indians and European civilization. Although progressing unevenly towards the latter (thanks to the efforts of missionary priests and others), they were always at risk of being drawn back to what he recurrently described as the indolence, improvidence, and superstition of their Indian relatives. Riel, de Tremaudan, and Giraud concur in the weight they give to the Metis' French bonds and affinities. But Giraud parts company with the first two in two major respects. First, he also includes in his history the broader range of *métis* people in the generic French sense — the anglophone Hudson's Bay Company families who constituted his "northern current", as well as those of French paternal origin. And second, whereas the others tend to mute the Metis' Indian heritage, Giraud makes it a continuing theme in his analysis, even if commonly as a negative element.

Despite its deficiencies, Giraud's book opened some new doors to Metis history. He was a pioneer in cultivating the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in London, England, for a field of study that most scholars had not yet thought of. It is regrettable that the University of Alberta Press has recast the format of the original French edition, converting all the mines of information in Giraud's original footnotes into notes buried at the end of the volumes. Readers need to counterbalance the weight of Giraud's often problematic interpretations by constant reference to the wealth of detailed data that can be gleaned from his documentation. For all his emphasis on what Emma LaRocque has called the "civ/sav" interpretation of Western Canadian history as the encounter between "civilized" Europeans and "savage" native peoples,<sup>10</sup> he did place the aboriginal heritage of the Metis at centre stage, calling attention to its enormous importance in much of Metis history and culture. Recent authors must set aside many of his judgements which are dated and ethnocentric; but they have followed him rather than Riel or de Tremaudan in pursuing in ever greater detail what R. Leslie Taylor has called "the native link".<sup>11</sup>

If Giraud passed rather lightly over Riel and the events of 1869-1885 and rather negatively over their Indian dimensions, authors and publishers of the mid-1980s

10 Emma LaRocque, "The Metis in English Canadian Literature", *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 3, 1, (1983), pp. 85-94. This special issue on the Metis since 1870, edited by Antoine S. Lussier, also contains essays on Metis social and political history and claims by 14 other authors.

11 See R. Leslie Taylor, *The Native Link: Tracing One's Roots to the Fur Trade* (Victoria, Pencrest Publications, 1984). In this book, the Rev. Leslie Taylor of Winnipeg reconstructed his own family lines back to HBC Orkney Island employees and their Indian wives.

have been busy compensating for him. The University of Alberta Press, besides publishing Riel and Giraud, has offered two useful reprints of historic accounts of those events: the Rev. John McDougall's *In the Days of the Red River Rebellion* (1983, first published in 1903) by one of Canada's leading Methodist missionaries, and the *Reminiscences of a Bungle: By one of the Bunglers (and two other Northwest Rebellion Diaries)*, published in 1984. Each has a valuable introduction, McDougall's written by Susan Jackel, and *Bungle* by R.C. Macleod, although the texts lack annotations and indexes. A further important reprint covering the Riel risings is Major Charles A. Boulton's *I Fought Riel: A Military Memoir*, edited by Heather Robertson (Toronto, James Lorimer & Co., 1985). Somewhat abridged from his *Reminiscences of the North-West Rebellions* published in 1886, this volume offers readable eye-witness account of these events from a conservative military perspective. As with practically all the other reprints mentioned in this review, however, the lack of index and the failure to identify the people mentioned by giving full names and adding annotations, however brief, are troublesome deficiencies.

Two other items, which are not reprints of old publications but rather firsthand accounts of the period, deserve mention. Guillaume Charette's *Vanishing Spaces: Memoirs of Louis Goulet*, first published in French by Editions Bois-Brulés in Winnipeg in 1976, became available in 1980 in English translation from the same press. Louis Goulet (1859-1936) vividly recorded for Charette his life from his early days travelling on the prairies with his family, to his experiences in 1885 and after, until he became blind in the 1890s. The personal detail and colour that Goulet brings to the 1870s and 1880s, along with his prairie Metis perspective on those years, make this volume one of the most memorable of those reviewed here. Much shorter, but also of importance for its perspective and content, is the memoir of an anglophone Metis, George William Sanderson (1846-1936), edited and published by Irene M. Spry in 1985.<sup>12</sup> Both Goulet and Sanderson offer us outlooks that are not available in most of the literature on the Metis. They speak as Metis, yet also as little known people, not much involved with Riel and his associates, who were caught up in events rather than seeking to direct them. In the latter respects, their situations compare somewhat to that of Saskatchewan trader and farmer Charles Bremner, who as a neighbour of the Cree chief Poundmaker during the conflicts of 1885, was imprisoned and had his furs seized because of false accusations that he was associated with Poundmaker.<sup>13</sup>

12 "The 'Memories' of George William Sanderson, 1846-1936", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 17, 2 (1985), pp. 115-34, special issue, "The Metis: Past and Present", edited by Thomas Flanagan and John Foster. Of the various special issues of journals on the Metis which marked the 1985 centenary, this, overall, contains the most valuable historical studies and reviews; among the other authors are P.R. Mailhot and D.N. Sprague on the Red River dispersal, Glen Campbell on Riel's poetry, Barry Cooper on A.K. Isbister, Trudy Nicks on the "ambivalent identity" of an Alberta Metis-Cree woman, and Ken Hatt, Sally Weaver, and Joe Sawchuk on various facets of Metis claims and government policy.

13 Margaret R. Stobie, *The Other Side of Rebellion: The Remarkable Story of Charles Bremner*

Aside from reprints and documentary items, several new syntheses and more specialized studies have broadened the range of our knowledge and historiographic perspectives on the 1869-1885 period. Of most general interest and scope is *Prairie Fire: The 1885 North-West Rebellion*, by Bob Beal and Rod Macleod (Edmonton, Hurtig, 1984). Highly readable and attractively produced, this volume also pays more attention than most older accounts to the troubles and grievances of the Indians and new settlers as well as the Metis, although as W.A. Waiser pointed out in his thoughtful review in *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 17, 2 (1985), pp. 155-6, their concluding analysis does not go beyond the older historiography to explore fully the implications of their synthesis. Bob Beal, one of the authors of *Prairie Fire*, also worked with Rudy Wiebe to compile and edit another volume on the subject, *War in the West: Voices of the 1885 Rebellion* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1985). Wiebe and Beal effectively combine vivid excerpts from contemporary documents, newspapers, and pictorial sources to tell the story of 1885 in the language and images of the time, following events and developments chronologically. The book is frustrating, however, to use for reference purposes. There is a minimal table of contents and no index. In many instances the sources for the documentary excerpts are not clearly cited; rather, on the last page, we get a listing of "the most readily available sources for some of the major texts in this book". The compilers and their publisher, while bringing forward some fascinating and often obscure source materials, short-change both the voices of 1885 and the reader by not going the extra inch towards adequate documentation and cross-referencing.

Of more specialized interest is Walter Hildebrandt's *The Battle of Batoche: British Small Warfare and the Entrenched Metis* (Ottawa, Parks Canada Studies in Archaeology, Architecture and History, 1985). Hildebrandt's detailed text, supported by valuable photographs, maps, and other illustrations and documentation, meticulously traces the events of May 1885 and offers, as well, brief overviews of the parties involved on both sides. In bringing the conflict at Batoche into sharp focus, it also makes a useful contribution to the social and military history of the period. While more accurate and penetrating than Beal and Macleod's *Prairie Fire* on the topic of Batoche and General Middleton, it has less success, as Frits Pannekoek has pointed out,<sup>14</sup> in portraying the Metis and their viewpoints. Another study by Hildebrandt deserves note: his essay on "Official Images of 1885", *Prairie Fire*, 6, 4 (1985), pp. 31-8, offers a stimulating critique of the widely distributed pictures of the events of 1885 which were published in the *Illustrated War News* and the *London Illustrated News* at the time, pointing out their stereotypic and biased representations.

To complete this survey of writings on 1885, a pair of provocative books draws attention to the complexities of forming definitive conclusions about the events of that year and their causes. In 1983, Thomas Flanagan published *Riel and his Furs* (Edmonton, NeWest Press, 1987).

14 Pannekoek, review in *Prairie Fire*, 6, 4 (1985), pp. 121-2.

*and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered* (Saskatoon, Western Producer Prairie Books). His thesis was that "the *Metis* grievances were at least partly of their own making" and that "the government was on the verge of resolving them when the Rebellion broke out" (p. viii). In 1985, Don McLean of the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research published his strongly divergent conclusions on the origins of the conflict in *1885: Metis Rebellion or Government Conspiracy?* (Winnipeg, Pemmican Publications). McLean argues that the Canadian government fostered the rebellion through the actions of Hudson's Bay Company officer Lawrence Clarke as an *agent provocateur*. The outpourings of patriotism, funds, and support for the government that the conflict engendered saved the Canadian Pacific Railway from bankruptcy, "saved the Conservative government's National Policy...from certain disaster", and even "preserved the young Canadian nation from eventual takeover by the United States" (p. 123). Both books set forth considerable documentation, although McLean's is the more overtly polemical. Neither fully resolves the issues. Clues that further analyses of a wider body of evidence are still needed come from D.N. Sprague's useful review of the works (which includes a comparison of them with Beal and Macleod's volume) in the periodical, *Prairie Fire*, 6, 4 (1985), pp. 100-7. Although Sprague's sympathies clearly lean towards McLean, he notes among other points, that all four authors might have granted more attention to the personal role and interventions of Sir John A. Macdonald in the events of 1885.<sup>15</sup> Readers interested in further comparison of viewpoints might look at Gerald Friesen's *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1984). Friesen makes no reference to Lawrence Clarke but says of Macdonald and 1885, "The federal government had spent over \$5 million to quell an uprising that had originated in Macdonald's concern for economy" (p. 231).

Indian involvement in the conflict of 1885, Indian views of that conflict, and its effects on Indian communities are all topics that have lately begun to receive more attention, although still largely in articles rather than books. Hugh A. Dempsey's *Big Bear: The End of Freedom* (Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre, 1984) is of major importance for its portrayal of the situation of Big Bear and his Cree people in the 1870s and 1880s. Wiebe and Beal's *War in the West*, mentioned earlier, cites several accounts concerning Indians in 1885, including P.G. Laurie's November 1885 newspaper description of the executions of the eight Indians "convicted of murders in the disturbances last spring" (pp. 184-6). On individual Indian leaders of those years, the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press) is a helpful guide; see the ten biographies of Plains leaders assembled in Volume XI, which covers people who died from 1881 to 1890.

The single source that is richest in perspectives on Indians and their intersections with the *Metis* and the events of the 1880s is *1885 and After: Native Society in*

15 Sprague's book on the subject, *Canada and the Metis, 1869-1885*, is forthcoming from Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

*Transition*, edited by F. Laurie Barron and James B. Waldram (Regina, Canadian Plains Research Center, 1986) and derived from a major conference on the Metis held in May 1985. Noel Dyck (on the reserve agricultural program in the prairie west), F.L. Barron (on Indian agents and the North-West Rebellion), and Blair Stonechild (on the Indian view of the 1885 uprising) all make valuable contributions, Stonechild drawing productively on Indian oral traditions. The volume is also important for its other analyses of the conditions of Indian and Metis life after 1885, on aspects of governmental policy, and on individuals; Donald B. Smith's paper on Will Jackson (Honoré Jaxon), Riel's secretary, has special poignancy.

A growing body of other writings also deals with Metis people and communities after the death of Riel. They effectively document that the Metis did not disappear once their hopes for political autonomy were dashed. Lacking political visibility or economic power, they nonetheless preserved a cultural and linguistic distinctiveness that has allowed their descendants to reaffirm mutual ties and a shared sense of identity a century later. The most important historical community study yet accomplished is *Batoche (1870-1910)* (St. Boniface, Manitoba, Editions du Blé, 1983), by Diane Payment. In four substantial chapters, Payment examines commerce and agriculture at Batoche, the relations between the community and the clergy, the issues of land title and scrip, and local Metis political activity from 1873 to 1910. Batoche, as she aptly notes, is mainly known as a theatre of rebellion and has often been considered a place from which the Metis dispersed after 1885. In fact, it preserved remarkable continuity, and is one of the best documented of historical Metis communities. Payment's book is not a full account of her research; her excellent 1986 article, "Batoche after 1885: A Society in Transition",<sup>16</sup> focusses more on social and family relationships and on culture and religion. Another book-length community study, seemingly hurried into print for the centenary, stands in disappointing contrast to Payment. Paul Driben's *We Are Metis: The Ethnography of a Halfbreed Community in Northern Alberta* (New York, AMS Press, 1985) describes the East Prairie Metis Colony near Lesser Slave Lake in Alberta. Based on fieldwork done in the summer and fall of 1970, the book incorporates no source materials later than 1972, and its interpretations and historical analysis are correspondingly flawed. While his ethnographic data have interest, his methods raise some questions. Declaring, for example, that his primary intention at all times was "to minimize research bias", he notes on the same page that his interviews were almost all with "the male settlers who owned land on the Colony.... Conversations with women and children were limited to those of the informal variety" (p. x). The poorly edited and clinical prose lacks the balance and textual richness of Payment's writing.

Aspects of Metis community life surface intriguingly but partially in a variety of other recent volumes. *Gabriel's Children* by Rita Schilling (Saskatoon, Saskatoon Metis Society, Local 11, 1983) compiles Metis history and local

16 In Barron and Waldram, eds., *1885 and After*, pp. 173-88.

traditions from the settlement of Round Prairie, Saskatchewan, into a vivid account of that community's origins and experiences — its disappearance after 1885, the return of several of its descendants from Montana to Round Prairie in the early 1900s, and their recent renewals of ties with relatives in Montana and elsewhere. A considerably sketchier view of a Metis community emerges from Gerry Andrew's *Metis Outpost: Memoirs of the First Schoolmaster at the Metis Settlement of Kelly Lake, B.C., 1923-1925* (Victoria, Pinecrest Publications, 1985). Andrews tells in rather scrapbook form of his experiences teaching the children of several Metis families in this Peace River area. While preserving interesting details and vignettes of the people he knew, the book does not relate its information to recent currents and contexts of Metis historiography.

Although focussed on two individuals, Murray Dobbin's *The One-and-a-Half Men: The Story of Jim Brady and Malcolm Norris, Metis Patriots of the 20th Century* (Vancouver, New Star Books, 1981) is valuable not only as biography but for its views of prairie Metis communities and political organization from the 1920s to the 1960s. Like Maria Campbell,<sup>17</sup> whose introduction sets the book in her own biographical context (she knew both Brady and Norris), they experienced the economic hardship, discrimination, and powerlessness that were the lot of people labelled as Metis (or more commonly, Halfbreed) in those years. Brady and Norris responded by drawing upon the currents of prairie socialism that animated the political left of their times. Working to organize Metis communities politically and enlisting with mixed results the aid of the CCF and the Communist Party, they followed activist, issue-oriented agendas that raised Metis consciousness and visibility in modes rather different from those chosen by de Tremaudan and L'Union Nationale St. Joseph du Manitoba in the same period.

Other clues to Metis community history, and specifically demography, come from D.N. Sprague's and R.P. Frye's compilation, *The Genealogy of the First Metis Nation: The Development and Dispersal of the Red River Settlement 1820-1900* (Winnipeg, Pemmican Publications, 1983). A 27-page introduction is followed by a massive compendium of census data arranged into six tables: Genealogies of Red River households 1818-1870; Family size, property, and location of landowners, 1835; Contract HBC employees recruited from or retired to Red River, 1821-70; Location and children of Manitoba families, 1870; Canadian government recognition of riverlot occupants after 1870; and Dispersal and relocation of the Manitoba Metis. The book is a useful starting point for genealogy and social history. Sprague and Frye rightly note, however, that users must beware of errors and omissions in both the sources and the tables. Their compilation is not exhaustive of all relevant census data (the Pembina area is not covered); nor have their data been integrated with other kinds of sources. The substantial dispersals of Metis to Montana and other American regions are ignored, producing a Canadian bias that does not allow for the complex

17 Author of the autobiographical volume, *Halfbreed* (Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1973), reprinted several times.

international aspects of Metis history. Users of the data also need to consider, more seriously than did the authors, in what senses the term Metis is globally appropriate or a historical falsification, as applied to the diversified native-born subgroups of 19th century Red River.

A small number of researchers have recently explored the nature and distinctiveness of historical Metis communities through studies of language and art. The Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota is home to a substantial biracial community classified as Indian by the U.S. government (which, in accord with general United States usage, gives no recognition to racially intermediate peoples). The linguist John C. Crawford for some years has been working with its Metis residents to study and record their speech, Michif, which arguably has several of the characteristics of a separate language, being a unique fusion of French and Chippewa-Cree. Under his editorship, two Turtle Mountain women, Patline Laverdure and Ida Rose Allard, have published *The Michif Dictionary: Turtle Mountain Chippewa Cree* (Winnipeg, Pemmican Publications, 1983). The words and phrases they compile document both the vitality of their cultural traditions and the special manner in which early and seemingly fairly egalitarian interactions of francophones and Chippewa and/or Cree speakers led to a language structured by the patterned combination of largely French nouns and noun phrases with Cree verbs. Crawford's own summary of this research appears in his 1985 article, "What is Michif? Language in the Metis Tradition", which also cites several other of the relatively few writings on this subject.<sup>18</sup>

Besides the *Dictionary*, the 1980s have seen the publication of one other book-length work on Metis language, Patrick C. Douaud's *Ethnolinguistic Profile of the Canadian Metis* (Ottawa, National Museum of Man Mercury Series, Canadian Ethnology Service Paper No. 99, 1985). The title is misleading; Douaud in fact concentrates his analysis upon the 14 households of the remnant Metis colony around the Oblate mission at Lac la Biche, Alberta. His analysis of their linguistic usages is, however, thorough and sensitive, demonstrating how profound changes in the community and its relationships with the outside world are reflected in its generational contrasts in language. The oldest survivors are trilingual; they were equipped to deal with the French priests, the Cree speakers, and the anglophone traders and officials whom they encountered in their varied spheres of activity. People under the age of 30, however, are typically monolingual in English; neither the mission or the other forces in their lives function to encourage maintenance of Cree or French. The linguistic picture drawn by Douaud contrasts strongly with the Turtle Mountain Cree-French synthesis, demonstrating that Metis communities, with their diverse historical experiences, share multiple ethnolinguistic profiles although with shared roots.

Besides their bonds of community life and language, many Metis share in a distinctive artistic and craft tradition. Ted J. Brasser's 1985 article, "In Search of Metis Art", is perhaps the best succinct statement of the major characteristics

18 In Peterson and Brown, eds., *The New Peoples*, pp. 231-41.

attributed to this art.<sup>19</sup> Centred in mid-19th-century Red River and points west, its practitioners decorated clothing, horse gear, and domestic articles such as place mats and tea cosies with rich floral designs in silk and beads; the Sioux reportedly knew the Metis as the "flowered beadwork people". Much of this decorative work was also market-oriented, being traded and sold widely across the plains. The organization of its manufacture and distribution needs further study, particularly to assess the roles of the women originators of the art. Native girls instructed in Roman Catholic missions learned and elaborated upon floral patterns of European origin, developing a style that contrasted with much of the older geometric quillwork and embroidery of Indian communities.

Although ethnic Metis artisans created much of this art, a simple one-to-one relationship between its products and ethnic Metis cannot be assumed. This problem was highlighted when Julia D. Harrison, curator of ethnology at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, organized a travelling exhibit of Metis arts and composed an illustrated volume, *Metis: People between Two Worlds* (Vancouver, Douglas and McIntyre, 1985) to go with it. Harrison's book has numerous historiographic problems, as John E. Foster's 1985 review has pointed out.<sup>20</sup> Equally problematic is the documentation of many of the artifacts and their makers. In her well-meant zeal to celebrate Metis art, Harrison casts her net very wide, using "Metis" throughout her book "to refer to all those of Native and European ancestry" (p. 7). This presents the risk of constructing a racial art, answering better to the enthusiasms of 1985 than to the artisans themselves, not all of whom would have identified themselves as Metis, and some of whom were surely Indian (status and non-status) in their primary affiliations. Trudy Nicks has offered a sensitive critique of the boundary problems we confront in the study and definition of Metis art; besides her review of the exhibit in *Muse*, 3, 4 (1986), pp. 52-5, her article "Mary Anne's Dilemma: The Ethnohistory of an Ambivalent Identity", examines both the evolving self-identification of a particular artisan and the questions that museum people faced when they attempted to classify her and her work.<sup>21</sup>

The issues of defining Metis art and of applying ethnic labels to its seemingly diverse creators are symptomatic of the problems alluded to at the beginning of this essay. In the efforts of scholars to impose order on the past, and in the enthusiasm to have the past serve and strengthen the ethnic needs and solidarities of the present, we create both scholarly and political myths. It is very difficult to return to the people of the past and to greet them on their own terms, as Metis, Halfbreed, Indian, or ethnically neutral, with appreciation for the meanings and implications of whatever designation they may have elected or may have endured from others. "Metisism" is a fluid concept, the braiding of channels in a river, "a living and re-creative process", to borrow again Emma LaRocque's phrase. It is

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 221-9.

20 In *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 17, 2 (1985), pp. 154-5.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 103-4.

real and substantial, yet will not rest quietly in the niches defined by governments, scholars, or particularistic ethnic organizations. Its history is dynamic and still unfolding, presenting continuing challenges for the present and future.

Another problem confronts the recognition and study of the Metis and of Metisism on the North American stage. The people and the concept cross international borders that scholars, legislators, and ethnic organizations usually fail to traverse. Like blind men with elephants, we grasp only what lies nearest and take it for the whole. The problem is the more severe in the United States, where Metis and others of mixed descent scarcely exist in the political and scholarly cosmology. There is no space for them in, for example, the intellectual universe of Calvin Martin as manifested in his new edited volume, *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1987), although they are a startling challenge to his simple dichotomy between the "people of myth" (American Indians) and the "people of history" (Europeans) (cf. pp. 195-9). Indeed, they are a challenge to all who would carry on the dichotomy of savage and civilized, in whatever rhetorical guise, and whatever their biases and sympathies.

Finally, if we move to a still broader perspective stretching beyond North America, we uncover yet another set of problems in the recent historiography of the Metis. If the writings mentioned here transcend with difficulty one national boundary, they arrive still less at a truly comparative overview, one that discovers that *métis* peoples (in the general French sense) are not unique to northern North America. In 1982, David H. Breen concluded in the pages of this journal that recent studies of the Canadian west have tended too much to turn inward upon themselves, with insufficient reference to contexts and interpretive frameworks from other parts of the world.<sup>22</sup> His comment applies as well to Metis historiography. Metis activists increasingly find common cause with other indigenous peoples with whom they feel kinship, as recent issues of the Metis National Council newsletter, *The Metis Nation* (Ottawa, 1984ff.) testify. Writers on the Metis have made enormous advances in the last few years, in both knowledge and sensitivity, but they might usefully explore further the historical comparisons that underlie that kinship, and could glean some new understandings in the process.

JENNIFER S.H. BROWN

22 "The Canadian Prairie West: A Review of Recent Studies", *Acadiensis*, 11, 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 117-29.