OF MÉTIS WOMEN AND HUNTING BRIGADES: REIMAGINING RED RIVER HISTORIES

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That the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in tandem with the sesquicentennial anniversary of the province of Manitoba offered me a reason, and afforded the lockdown time, to meditate upon the state of Red River Métis research. Some scholars have argued that Selkirk's settlement has been overstudied to the detriment of other Northwest Métis communities, yet silences and gaps continue to limit our understanding of Red River's Native population.[1] My current research on the Red River Valley-based commercial bison hunting brigades, for example, has prompted me to ponder the extent of our knowledge of the lived experience of the nineteenth-century Métis women of Red River. Scholarly consensus holds that the contribution of Métis women was pivotal for the commercial success of these hunting brigades, but we know so little about their lives during the glory decades

1 In his 1988 Métis studies literature review, J. R. Miller discussed a perceived "Red River myopia," an assertion that too much of what had been published had focused on the colony situated at the forks of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers. This criticism was echoed in 2001 by Fritz Pannekoek, who coined the term "bog of Red River" to describe this ongoing fixation on Selkirk's settlement. J. R. Miller, "From Riel to the Métis," *Canadian Historical Review* 69 (1988): 1-20; and Frits Pannekoek, "Métis Studies, the Development of a Field and New Directions," in *From Rupert's Land to Canada*, eds. Theodore Binnema, Gerhard J. Ens, and R. C. Macleod (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2001), 111-128.

of the commercial bison hunts, as well as after the ecological catastrophe incited by the disappearance of these vast herds. Gaps of this nature demonstrate that scholars need not yet abandon Red River.

> **"The contribution of Métis women was pivotal for the commercial success of these hunting brigades, but we know so little about their lives during the glory decades of the commercial bison hunts"**

For years, scholars have called for greater attention to the role of women in Plains Métis society. In 1983, Jennifer Brown suggested that Métis society was characterized by matriorganization.[2] A decade apart from each other, Diane Payment and Martha Foster each emphasized the centrality of women, especially of sisters, in the organization of communities and hunting brigades.[3] Research conducted by Cheryl Troupe, Emilie Pigeon, Brenda Macdougall, and myself have demonstrated the key roles played by clusters of closely related women in bringing together otherwise unrelated groups of men into effective and cohesive hunting brigades.[4] For example, the famed "Trottier brigade" was described by member Norbert Welsh as webbed together by a senior woman, Louise Laframboise (m. Isidore Dumont), and her three nieces, sisters Philomène (m. Moise Landry), Ursule (m. Charles Trottier), and Angélique Laframboise (m. Antoine Trottier).[5]

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But the determination of matrifocal cohesiveness has left other economic, social, and cultural aspects of Métis women's lives still shrouded in mystery. Anecdotally, we know of the pivotal role collectively played by Métis women in the transformation of prodigious amounts of bison meat, fat, and hides into marketable and profitable pemmican and robes. Historian George Colpitts has made clear that these were exacting and extremely time-sensitive procedures, especially during the large summer hunts when heat-induced spoilage and rancidification were an ever-present danger.[6] Period accounts

2 Jennifer Brown, "Women as Centre and Symbol in the Emergence of Métis Communities," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 3 (1983): 39-46.

3 Diane Payment, "*La vie en rose ?* Métis Women at Batoche, 1870 to 1920", in *Women of the First Nations: Power, Wisdom, and Strength, eds. Christine Miller and Patricia Chuchryk* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1996), 19-38; and Martha Harroun Foster, *We Know Who We Are: Métis Identity in a Montana Community* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006).

4 Cheryl Lynn Troupe, *Métis Women: Social Structure, Urbanization and Political Activism, 1850-1980* (Master's Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 2009); Emilie Pigeon, A Social Network of Hunters? Métis Mobility and New Methodological Approaches in History (poster presentation, Canadian Historical Association, 2013), and Brenda Macdougall and Nicole St-Onge, *Rooted in Mobility: Métis Bufallo-Hunting Brigades,* Manitoba History 71 (2013): 16-27.

5 Norbert Welsh, *The Last Buffalo Hunter* (1939; Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1994); and Troupe, *Métis Women*.

6 George Colpitts, "A Métis View of the Summer Market Hunt on the Northern Plains," in *Bison and People on the North American Great Plains: A Deep Environmental History*, eds. Geoff Cunfer and Bill Waiser (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2016): 201-225.

claim that a single skilled Métis woman could butcher upwards of ten bison carcasses a day.[7] Métis women were thus crucial both for their roles of bringing together a brigade and for their skills in the transformation process needed to produce the pemmican and robes – the very raison d'être of these commercial hunting brigades. But did these key indispensable roles in hunting ventures translate into enhanced agency and status within the broader Métis society?

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The large-scale commercial hunting brigades were a nineteenth-century adaptation to both a specific northern plains ecosystem with its vast bison herds and the specific demands of an international fur trade economy. Brigades were unique social configurations emerging from the provisioning needs of a far-flung, salaried workforce. Did this reality elevate the importance of Plains Métis women, and thus their influence, within Plains Métis society? Outsider (largely male) nineteenth-century observers – fur trader, clergy, and adventurers – often viewed native women as mere drudges and slaves working ceaselessly for uncaring and unkind men.[8] While such biased and gendered observations have been forcefully critiqued by scholars examining the lived experiences of First Nations women, more work needs to be done in regards to Plains Métis brigades women.

> **"Brigade Métis women possessed more agency than those in the Red River Colony's population who were less invested in the commercial hunts."**

Economic historians might well assume that the need to create large amounts of marketable surpluses of pemmican and robes exacerbated already unequal gender roles.[9] But if we consider the opposite – that Métis women's position was enhanced by the vital roles they played within la nouvelle nation – one could speculate then that they achieved greater agency than found in either the eastern euro-agrarian settlements or among neighbouring Plains tribes. Indeed, one might even argue that brigade Métis women possessed

7 Townsend's Blog, Pemmican.

8 Denise K. Lajimodiere, "American Indian Females and Stereotypes: Warriors, Leaders, Healers, Feminists; Not Drudges, Princesses, Prostitutes," *Multicultural Perspectives* 15, no. 2 (2013): 104-109.

9 Pekka Hamalainen has argued this was the case in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century among the Comanche, where their increasing involvement in a market economy led to a rise in polygamy and female slavery linked to proportional decline in the status of many women. Pekka Hamalainen, *Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 247-257.



William George Richardson Hind, *Buffalo on the Prairie*, ca.1863.
Image Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.

more agency than those in the Red River Colony's population who were less invested in the commercial hunts. While recent publications likening these brigades to "mobile villages" have argued that "Métis brought this long-standing ethic of sharing with them from their farming communities," perhaps this assertion puts too much emphasis on the influence of the agrarian social elements of the Red River Settlement on brigade dynamics.[10] A majority of Plains Métis involved in the large commercial hunts were descendants of salaried, professional fur trade employees and First Nations women. They may have engaged in some agricultural pursuits at Red River, but it is far from clear that they were replicating a French Canadian or Scottish peasant *mentalité* in a mobile state. Neither is it clear that the Métis simply mirrored surrounding Plains tribes' social customs. Thus, while elements from the French, Scottish, and various Native societies contributed to the emergence of the Plains Métis, the final product – the commercial hunting brigades and the role that women played within them – may well be unique phenomena.

> **"The bison herds' demise in the 1870s and 1880s was not just an economic catastrophe, but also a profound social disaster that directly impacted gender roles and relations."**

Sadly, the logic of Métis social organization emerging and adapting to large-scale commercial hunting lost its rationale once the northern plains bison herds collapsed. If the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' bison economy produced a unique Plains society, then the bison herds' demise in the 1870s and 1880s was not just an economic catastrophe, but also a profound social disaster that directly impacted gender roles and relations. Such massive changes must have been wrenching for both men and women, giving the Métis little choice but to reconsider and restructure their social matrix to function in a new post-commercial hunt reality. If we accept as a working hypothesis that Plains Métis women held great agency and importance within the bison hunting brigades, what did the sudden complete end of commercial bison hunts in the 1880s mean for them? Although Métis-organized freighting caravans and York boat

10 Emilie Pigeon and Carolyn Podruchny, "The Mobile Village: Métis Women, Bison Brigades, and Social Order on the Nineteenth-Century Plains," in *Violence, Order, and Unrest: A History of British North America, 1749-1876*, eds. Elizabeth Mancke, Jerry Bannister, and Scott W. See (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 236-263.

brigades continued for some years after the bison hunts collapsed, in no way did these pursuits mobilize to the same degree women's collective labour. After bison hunting ceased to be the economic basis of Plains Métis society, new livelihoods and new social relations had to be constructed or renegotiated, for the dynamics of nineteenth-century wage labour or family farming were quite different from those supporting large-scale commercial hunting.

> **"The transition to commercial agriculture in the climactically difficult 1870s was especially traumatic for the traditional bison-hunting parishes."**

Questions remain as to what occurred to former brigade members who continued to reside in the Red River Colony after the final unsuccessful hunt of 1868. How did former brigade members hailing from parishes such as Saint-Francoix Xavier (White Horse Plains) and Saint-Norbert adapt to the changing circumstances? How long did women maintain their seemingly central social and economic roles in the post-hunt era? We know the transition to commercial agriculture in the climactically difficult 1870s was especially traumatic for the traditional bison-hunting parishes. Historian Gerhard Ens has noted that infant mortality rate tripled in the parish of Saint-Francois Xavier during this decade.[11] My own research in the adjacent parish of Saint-Eustache indicates that the post-1914 years were hard for many Métis men and women, reduced to seasonal field work for nearby French-Canadian market gardeners.[12] Evelyn Peters' recent work on Winnipeg's Rooster Town has pointed to the same precarious living and working conditions for several twentieth-century urban Métis families.[13] However, such works leave unexplained the transition decades between the pre-1870 bison commercial hunting lifeways and the post-World War I era Métis communities, especially when it comes to women's economic contributions and social agency.

Martha Foster, Diane Payment, and Cheryl Troupe have each studied how the end of the commercial hunts affected western Plains Métis communities in Saskatchewan and Montana. Interestingly, they have found clear signs of continuity in women's social networks' role in binding together communities and in maintaining collective economic pursuits, such as communal gardens, between the pre-bison herd collapse and the post-hunt era.[14] That makes more attractive the curiosity as to how former brigade Métis women who remained in the old Red River Colony parishes after 1870 experienced these transitional decades. Could the rise of disruptive pressures on Métis women's traditional social and economic roles be yet another factor

11 Gerhard Ens, *Homeland to Hinterland: The Changing Worlds of the Red River Métis in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: UTP, 1996): 156-159.

12 Nicole St-Onge, "Memories of Métis Women of Saint-Eustache, Manitoba, 1910-1980," *Native Studies Review* 17, no. 2 (2008): 45-68.

13 Evelyn Peters, Matthew Stack, Adrian Werner, *Rooster Town: The History of an Urban Métis Community* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 2018).

14 In her study of the Trottier brigade who settled in Round Prairie, Cheryl Troupe discussed how women maintained large communal gardens while the men worked as day labourers even after their move to the city of Saskatoon. Troupe, *Métis Women*, 77-83.



Unknown Photographer, This Indigenous woman is supposed to have been manning the boat used by the North West Half Breed Claims Royal Commission, 1885. Image Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.

explaining some of the departures after 1868? Commonly cited explanations for the departure of many former hunting families from Red River include a growing climate of settler racism and violence, chronic farming hardships, and a dislike for menial salaried work. But perhaps an overlooked factor was a desire by Métis women to maintain a more communally oriented society where they held greater agency.[15] These questions surrounding the historic roles of the Red River women members of the fabled bison hunting brigades before and after the end of the hunts will hopefully fuel another generation of historians to revisit the forks of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers.

15 This may explain some of the differences in economic pursuits and general attitude disapprovingly noted by ethnologist Marcel Giraud, based on field research conducted in the 1930s. Marcel Giraud, *Le Métis canadien* (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie, 1945), 1231-1286.