No Comment (Almost):

200 YEARS OF OBSERVATIONS ON THE MÉTIS*

ABSTRACT

Through a collection of quotations, Jean Teillet argues this is how the Métis have been depicted throughout history.

Our Canadian sense of history and civilization is so firmly fixed that it allows us, with scarcely any pangs of conscience, to see in every generation, the Métis we wish to see.

"Lacking any solidly established religious principles, because they had been brought up too close to the Indians, they quickly surrendered – with few exceptions – to the extreme freedom of morals that prevailed among the native people…"[1]

"Some mixed bloods even preferred the freedom and hazards of the hunter's life to the monotonous regularity of the tasks to be undertaken in the trading posts…"[2]

"Had he [W.B. Robinson] intended to include, or ever anticipated – that French Canadians and French Half-breeds or other breeds of like fecundity and longevity – were to be recognized as Indians by the Department of Indian Affairs and permitted to draw Annuities which his Province would be called upon to pay a man of the Hon. W.B. Robinson's sagacity and shrewdness would surely have inserted a clause in the treaty to protect the Province from such an imposition."[3]

"This persistent nationalism, however narrow its base may have been, communicated to the Métis group a veritable spirit of solidarity, a principle of cohesion that largely made up for the divergence of the cultures which came together in his personality and for the many disparate elements which his natural indiscipline, his excessive individualism, and his lack of will-power produced in his ranks."[4]

"James Dreaver… arrived at Red River… in the early 1850s… He asked a Catholic priest about a nearby group of boisterous men. They were dark skinned but obviously not Indians. 'They are the one-and-a-half men,' the priest replied, 'half Indian, half white and half devil.'"[5]

"…the French half-breeds were indolent, thoughtless and improvident, unrestrained in their desires, restless, clannish and vain. …These metis were not a savage, vicious, or immoral people, but honest, hospitable and religious, rather improvident and happy-go-lucky, without care and without restraint, true sons of the prairie, as free as the air they breathed and by nature as independent as the land which gave them birth."[6]

"One Métis looks like another; the Government will never know it…"[7]

"In the settlement process they were a nation of squatters. Macdonald knew, as any lawyer knew, that squatters were notoriously suspicious, impatient, and stubborn people, and that the settlement of their ill-defined claims was probably the most exasperating and difficult problem that could confront a land-granting department."[8]

"If the hon. Gentleman waits until the Indian or the half-breed ceases to grumble, he will have to wait till the day of doom. They always grumble."[9]

"Twenty white informants were invited to submit a definition of a Métis or Half-Breed… (VI) A person who when he has money lives like a white man and when he is broke lives like an Indian."[10]

"A primitive people, the Half-breeds were bound to give way before the march of more progressive people. It was the recognition of this fact and the gradual realization of their inability to adjust themselves to the new order that kindled the spark of Half-breed resentment which unfortunate circumstances fanned into the flame of insurrection."[11]

"Mr. Pennock (Ewing Commission): You were speaking of the Half-breed owning land. I suppose the great trouble with the Half-breed is, he is irresponsible."[12]

"Commissioner Douglas: What is your opinion regarding the value to the half-breed of giving him an education?

Bishop Breynat: I don't think he should be given too much education. Too much is bad for some of them…

Chairman Ewing: I agree with you there, too much would be a bad thing."[13]

JEAN TEILLET

Jean Teillet practices law in Toronto with the law firm Pape & Salter. She specializes in Aboriginal and Metis rights law. She recently represented Steve Powley of Sault Ste. Marie in his 10 year battle to have Metis hunting rights recognized. Powley took his case all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada and won. Teillet is the great grand-niece of Louis Riel.

"Ewing: Would you say the definition 'anyone having Indian blood in their veins and living the normal life of a half-breed' comes within the definition of 'half-breed'?… You see you must include 'living the life of a half-breed'"…[14]

"The 'working definition' [of a half-breed] was arrived at [by the Ewing Commission]. It was not history which defined a 'half-breed', not politics nor even biology. You weren't a Métis because you could trace your origins to the Red River or the South Saskatchewan. You had to have Indian blood, but you were a 'half-breed' only if you lived outside the dominant society, if you lived the 'life of a half-breed.' Because you lived a certain kind of life – the traditional life of hunting, fishing and trapping, a poor life, characterized by illness and ignorance – you were a 'half-breed'. Why were people condemned to live such a life? Because they were 'half-breeds'. There was no escape from this nether world. The cause was also the consequence."[15]

"But the important thing was not the smallness of the numbers of people who lived or died in the hope of sustaining their chosen way of existence, but rather the final shifting of power in the West from those who lived in and on and with the environment – whether they were Indians or Métis – and those who wished to live off it, to dominate and to exploit it. In the moral dimension, it was the destruction of the distinctive culture of a small number of people to serve the interests of vastly more numerous intruders."[16]

"If the Métis called themselves, during that seventy years when they still formed a power in the prairies, a distinctive 'nation', they did not base the claim on population or on formal political arrangements. They made it because they felt themselves a distinct people who had a role to play in their world and who took a pride in that role, considering no life better than that of the adept hunter and guide and – when the necessity arose – prairie warrior."[17]

"When the Métis sought to achieve nationhood in the strange empire of the West, white men called it treason, the greatest of crimes… [They] were martyred in the name of Manifest Destiny or Canada First or an Anglo-Saxon God. There were no gas chambers then, but there was malevolent intention; and there were guns and hunger, smallpox and syphilis. And 'backward' peoples, then as now, could be used as puppets in the power politics of dynamic 'civilized' states. …[They] clung to the old loyalties, defied science and the machine – and perished. Of course they were an illiterate people, primitive and unstable, not even white. And their spokesman and symbol, who believed the old values to be good, became thereby a traitor."[18]

"He [Riel] shall hang though every dog in Quebec bark in his favour."[19]

"He died on the gallows and his nation died with him – his nation, and the dream of a strange empire in the West. The ideas from which the dream evolved live on among the remnants of his people, but they live feebly because the race is weak and dispersed and despised. The official histories read by other people have no room for them. Civilized man has achieved so much; there is no place for the dreams of a people who had no written literature, whose only art was that which adorned their garments or their homes, who built no cities, devised no economic theories. History cannot avoid however, a grudging acknowledgment that this odd nation could produce men with a bent for politics and war, and that one or two of them may even have been geniuses in those fields."[20]

"'Métis aboriginal rights' are a historical mistake… At this point, the best strategy to minimize the damage caused by the thoughtless elevation of the Métis to the status of a distinct 'aboriginal' people is to emphasize the word 'existing' in section 35 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms."[21]

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"Professor Sprague tells why the Métis did not receive the land that was supposed to be theirs under the *Manitoba Act*… It is a shameful tale, but one that must be told. It offers the explanation for the fact that today the Métis, once dominant at Red River, indeed the guardians of the community there, should now find themselves strangers in their own land. In 1982, the Canadian Parliament belatedly recognized the Métis as one of the aboriginal peoples of Canada. It remains, to us, now that we know how they lost their land, to see that they get the landbase they were promised."[22]

"…people can do strange things when… they have not yet established their right to pride in their race, their religion, or their 'nationality'; when their skins are neither light nor dark but – most outlandish of all – just in between; when a way of life that has worked for generations suddenly will not work at all, through no fault of theirs; when all their dreams of things as they used to be and perhaps could be again are fashioned into passionate speech by a man on horse-back, his upthrust hand grasping a cross. People like that have one sure and certain loyalty. It is place. It may be as tiny as a burial ground where the bones of their forefathers rest; it may be half a continent whose landmarks bear the names their progenitors bestowed. Acre or empire, they will fight for it until the spirit is dead."[23]

Endnotes

* Thanks to Dan Benoit and Lindsay Thompson for their assistance in gathering these quotes.

1 George Woodcock, *The Métis in the Canadian West* (University of Alberta Press, Edmonton, 1986) translation of Marcel Giraud's *Le Métis canadien* published in 1945 in Paris at Vol. 1, p. 328. at p. 328.

2 *Ibid.,* at p. 328.

[3] *Borron Reports* of 1891 and 1892 as cited in the *Report of Gwynneth Jones* (1998) prepared for the trial *R. v. Powley.* Ms. Jones was the Crown's historical expert.

[4] Woodcock, *supra,* Vol. 2, p. 202.

[5] Murray Dobbin, *The One-and-a-Half Men: The Story of Jim Brady & Malcolm Norris, Métis Patriots of the 20th Century* (Gabriel Dumont Institute, Regina, 1981)

[6] Stanley, George F.G. Stanley, *The Birth of Western Canada: A History of the Riel Rebellions* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1963) first published in 1936 *supra,* at p. 8-9.

[7] Hansard; Commons Debates, March 26, 1885, per Sir John A. Macdonald

[8] D.G. Creighton, *Sir John A. Macdonald,* (Toronto, 1956) at p. 369

[9] Hansard; Commons Debates, March 26, 1885 per Sir John A. Macdonald.

[10] Legasse, *The People of Indian Ancestry of Manitoba: A Social and Economic Study* (Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1958) at Vol. 1, p. 56-57.

[11] Stanley, *supra* at p. 49

[12] Royal Half-breed Commission (also known as the Ewing Commission, established in 1934 by an Order in Council of the Alberta government. The mandate was to enquire "into the condition of the Half-breed population of Alberta, keeping particularly in mind the health, education, relief and general welfare of such population.") Proceedings, pg. 36. as cited in The Métis Association of Alberta and Joe Sawchuk, Patricia Sawchuk and Theresa Ferguson, *Métis Land Rights in Alberta: A Political History* (Métis Association of Alberta, Edmonton, 1981) at p. 192.

[13] Royal Half-breed Commission. Proceedings, pg. 538, as cited in Dobbin, *supra* at p. 99.

[14] Dobbin, *supra* at p. 95.

[15] *Ibid.* at p. 95.

[16] George Woodcock, *Gabriel Dumont: The Métis Chief and his Lost World* (Hurtig Publishers: Edmonton, 1975) p. 18.

[17] Joseph Howard Kinsey, *Strange Empire* (William Morrow and Company: New York, 1952) p. 19.

[18] *Ibid.,* at p. 16-17.

[19] G. R. Parkin, *Sir John A. Macdonald: The Makers of Canada* (Morang & Co. Ltd: Toronto) p. 244.

[20] Kinsey, *supra* at p. 18.

[21] Thomas Flanagan, *The Case Against Métis Aboriginal Rights,* Canadian Public Policy, IX:3:314-325, 1983.

[22] Thomas R. Berger in the forward to D.N. Sprague, *Canada and the Métis,* 1869-1885 (Wilfred Laurier University Press: 1988) at p. vii-viii.

[23] Kinsey, *supra* at p. 18-19.