

"AN ABSOLUTELY UNCRITICAL LOOK
AT WHAT HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE METIS"

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Moins, ch'tin Michif -- ipi -- in Michif di St. Laurent
apor di ca!

(Me, I am a Michif -- and -- a Michif from St. Laurent
on top of that!)

History has declared that important consequences flow from that simple fact.

Marcel Giraud addressed, in 1937, what he termed the emergence of "a social group entirely destitute, defenceless, and paralysed by an over-sensitive shyness among civilized people".¹

Perhaps we can pass the hat now for contributions to the Paul Chartrand Relief Fund...and for those of you who consider yourselves civilized people - do not ask me to speak up...

Giraud's analysis led him to conclude that the tiny village of St. Laurent was occupied by a "very backward" group. Here, culture was almost non-existent.² In contrast, Giraud pointed to the Metis inhabitants of the Red River Valley, the "civilizing nucleus of the half-breed (sic) population".³ These "Metis de la Riviere-Rouge", Giraud characterized as well-adjusted people, constituting a sort of mixed-blood upper class, to a large extent on a par with the white farmers".⁴

But the Metis of St. Laurent were a different type. Here, he observed, "their mental traits appear as incompletely developed as their biological composition.."⁵

Given these historical conclusions, it should occasion no surprise that the weakling who now addresses you should indulge in anything but an absolutely uncritical look at the judgments of history. I hope that my poor expression will not cause you much trouble.

The so-called "poly-glot jabber" of the Metis has often been remarked upon. The first so-called "Half-Breed" Scrip Commissioner, a lawyer from London, Ontario named W.P.R. Street, recounted in his 1885 report the problems he had understanding what he understood to be the "French" language of the Metis of present-day Saskatchewan. It caused him trouble to translate such names as 'Crasus Tome' to 'Chrysostome', 'Frozine' to 'Euphrosyne' and 'Cheboo' to 'Thibault'.⁶

I note that some of my uncivilized and uncultured friends in this room have no such trouble with this language.

What is the story of the Metis? What are they like as a group, and as individuals?

It has been written, and therefore we know...that,

when the agricultural frontier advanced into the Red River Valley in the 1870's, the half-breed (sic) community of the West (sic) la nation metisse (sic) was doomed, and made its last ineffectual protest against extinction in the Saskatchewan Rebellion of 1885.

It is also written, and therefore we also know, that,

At Batoche, the Metis nation was broken, and thereafter, though there were individual Metis, and Metis communities in the West from Pembina to the Athabaska, there was no more a coherent people or a unique community. Civilization had triumphed over barbarism...the Metis...were shattered, and survive today as submerged communities and marginal persons.⁸

And what does history tell us about life in these submerged communities?

[They] maintained their primitive characteristics and archaic economy, living in either abundance or poverty according to the vagaries of hunting and fishing, motivated by a superstitious mind, destitute of all ambition, and

rebellious to the idea of giving schooling to their children...

...Around the towns and villages they waited for whatever chance occupations might come up, or else lived in apathy and misery because the ordeal which they were undergoing did not evoke in them that energy which made the superiority of the White.

Also, in these submerged communities, it is written that,

the bulk of the population are more and more addicted to lazy ways, and rely on the government for their source of living. They eke out a poor existence, but seldom complain of their sad lot. Some of them even like to narrate how speculators have deceived them, and humorously give urban names to the unoccupied lands upon which they have erected their shacks, such as 'St. Boniface', 'Ft. Rouge'...

And what does history tell us about these marginal persons who lived in these submerged communities? It has been written, and therefore we know, that,

...the past experiences of these people and the conditions under which they are now living do not produce a type of person much in demand in our society.

The reason for that has also been written about:

The white man's maxim, "Work that ye may eat", had been entirely foreign to their philosophy. They had never needed to work in order to exist, and had no such incentive.

It is also written that,

Many of the subtleties of the white man's life are as yet lost on the Metis. Most of them remain amoral, and illegitimacy occasions no stigma.

I hope there are no cultured single ladies here, because I have spied some amoral Metis in this gathering.

Another characteristic of the marginal persons has often been remarked upon. One writer comments about a Metis' habit:

...sa passion pour les liqueurs fortes, qu'un trop grand nombre d'autres Bois-Brules, comme on appelait aussi les Metis, partageaient malheureusement avec lui...¹⁴

And in the same vein, history has said about one of this speaker's ancestors;

Michel Chartrand, quo'on appelait par sobriquet "OPISHKWAT", la 'vessie de poisson', pensioma l'abbee Gascon pendant quelque temps, c'etait un excellent coeur mais malheureusement adonne a la boisson et violent quand il etait ivre...¹⁵

And about the war of resistance at Batoche in 1885 it has been recently written that the Metis, "may have only dimly perceived what the real goals were...¹⁶

Have these dim-writted marginal persons any redeeming qualities?

They have an acute sense of observation which, allied to their artistic minds, explains their curious gift for drawing...¹⁷

Perhaps I can auction off the doodles I made on my serviette during dinner?

It has also been written, and therefore we know, that, "The Metis take naturally to ranching, and...many of the men affect the stetson and demin garb of the cowboy".¹⁸

Also, ..."They are competent lumberjacks, and take naturally to carpentry and woodworking."¹⁹

But these superglue-type individuals have difficulties in adjusting their health statistics to meet the high Canadian general population profile because, as it is written,..."pneumonia [is] a bugbear to people who have not yet become fully convinced of the benefits of cool, fresh air in their cabins".²⁰

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Progress, nevertheless, is being made because,..."the unutterable filth of a decade ago has been replaced in most instances by something approaching cleanliness".²¹

And we should have known that sooner or later we would have Metis playing in the N.H.L. when we were told about Metis youngsters that,..."Although lacking in equipment, they have as much fun with bent branches for hockey sticks as the average youngster with a full kit".²²

But has the plight of the Metis gone unheeded by the state, and by the Church, in Canadian history?

In 1890, Sir John A. Macdonald received a letter from D.H. Macdonald with these suggestions for the resolution of Metis demands:

...I urge an early settlement of their demands. There are various ways of accomplishing this, either by giving scrip or by adopting some means of benefitting and civilizing them such as the following: To place all the semi-civilized half-breeds on a Reserve with the Protestant element on one side and the Catholic on the other. To have an Agent and one white Assistant (sic) to manage the Reserve who again would appoint say ten or more native police or overseers from among the most intelligent of the half-breeds. Should you appoint a man who is capable of controlling men, as Agent (sic) he will easily govern his little Colony (sic) through his Police (sic), whom again he could govern through their stomachs.²³

And what was the motivation behind the helpful suggestion? The same letter explains that it is "solely for the sake of peace,...as well as because the half-breeds are a political factor, that I urge an early settlement of their demands".²⁴

The same motivation is revealed in a letter of a churchman to a politician. The Church suggested that a grant of land to it would be a good thing because Metis could be gathered to,

remove them from the uncertain existence they were leading, and away from the infectious influences of vice and demoralization which, were there no prompt

remedy, would very soon become a danger of extreme gravity to public order.²⁵

And governments did step in and tried to do something about the Metis, because it is recorded that "In 1941 a government rehabilitation scheme tossed thousands of dollars worth of cattle, horses and agricultural equipment among them".²⁶

And how did the Metis respond to such government largesse? "They ate the cattle, left the machinery to rust in the still uncleared timber land, and remained wards of the government".²⁷

In the meantime, both academic commentators and bureaucrats had voiced the opinion that the Metis ought to have been treated like the Indians, that is, they ought to have been placed on reserves and controlled through their stomachs, that is, by a policy of planned starvation.²⁸

Indeed, in at least one instance, the Church did establish a Metis Reserve, but it failed. How did the churchmen react to this failure?

...after having skilfully gotten around the Metis (sic) and won the approval of the Government (sic), the missionaries opened the Reserve (sic) to a significant contingent of French-Canadians.²⁹

Father Lacombe, writing in 1895, described the Metis-government relationship in this way:

It is acknowledged today that the half-breeds (sic) have been well and justly treated by the Government (sic), but unfortunately owing to their natural improvidence, they have wasted what they received.³⁰

The notion that the government dealt not unreasonably with the Metis has its adherents today, for it was written late in 1983 that,

the Metis grievances were at least partly of their own making; ...the government was on the verge of resolving them when the Rebellion (sic) broke out; ...Riel's resort to arms could not be explained by the failure of constitutional agitation; and

...he received a surprisingly fair trial.³¹

So there.....

In 1870 the federal government recognized the existence of Metis aboriginal rights in terms of the Manitoba Act. That recognition continued in government legislation and policy into the twentieth century.

In 1898, Archer Martin, a member of the Canadian Bar and a prominent writer on the legalities of land rights, wrote about the aboriginal title of the Metis of Manitoba. He wrote,

The question of aboriginal title is not too well understood, in spite of the fact that, in the course of the rapid extension of the British Empire, it is one that constantly crops up...³²

One not familiar with the peculiarities of the people known in Manitoba as half-breeds, (sic), or metis (sic), would naturally ask how [the Manitoba Act land grant] to them would extinguish the Indian title, though the name itself would go to show that they had a right in blood to participate to the extent of a moiety.³³

In 1982 the Canadian state enshrined the aboriginal rights of the Metis in terms of section thirty-five of the Constitution Act.

1982: (1) The existing aboriginal and treaty rights of the aboriginal peoples of Canada are hereby recognized and affirmed.

(2) In this Act, "aboriginal peoples of Canada" includes the Indian, Inuit and Metis peoples of Canada.

Nevertheless, an examination of the recent literature on Metis aboriginal rights turns up references to "overheated rhetoric about sacred rights"..., the "semi-mystical aura of aboriginal rights"³⁴ and an article boldly entitled "The Case against Metis Aboriginal Rights".³⁵

These controversial matters are very difficult for a Metis to understand, for it has been written that, "as soon as severe intellectual discipline is required, the mixed-blood gives up every exertion".³⁶

Rather than think problems through, the Metis have focussed upon a hero-figure, a symbol of their struggle for survival, Louis Riel. About him, the churchmen declared in 1887:

Nous, pretres des districts qu'affecte plus
particulierement la rebellion...desirons attirer
l'attention de nos nationaux du Canada: Louis 'David'
Riel ne merite pas les sympathies de l'eglise
catholique romaine et des membres de cette Eglise.³⁷

A middle-of-the-twentieth century historian declared,

It was their [the Metis] tragedy that the
instability and violence of Riel, reflecting the
inherent instability and ready violence of his own
uncertain people, ruined his achievement and
destroyed his nation.³⁸

In 1983 a revisionist history of Louis Riel and the Metis attracted the newspaper headline: "Riel deserved to hang, book says".³⁹ The same book, which was chosen by the Book-of-the-Month Club, received a reviewer's comment in Maclean's magazine that it "provides sad proof that a century after Riel's death the sentiment of vengeance remains strong".⁴⁰

Keep in mind, ladies and gentlemen, that this choice of quotations from history must have been motivated by what has been termed the "extreme sensitiveness" of the Metis.⁴¹

But nevertheless, these are not quotations gleaned from the graffiti of washroom walls! These quotations are not the off-hand remarks of uneducated persons in a moment of passion! These quotations are gathered from the words of the historians of the highest esteem in

this country, and from writings in learned journals done by professional writers who could draw upon the resources of the educated person in Canada.

Is there anything that all writers are agreed upon concerning the Metis? Yes, I think most are agreed that the Metis, these one-and-a-half men (half-Indian, half-French and half-devil) can have fun in their own way...can have fun being devils. I see some of those people that I know right now. I think I shall go join them....
Waiter, bring us five gallons of red wine and call the cops!⁴²

END NOTES

¹M. Giraud. "A Note on the Half-Breed Problem in Manitoba". The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science (1937), p. 541-549, at p. 542.

²M. Giraud. Le Metis Canadien. Paris, Universite de Paris, 1945, p. 1077.

³M. Giraud, supra, note 1, p. 543.

⁴loc. cit.

⁵Ibid, p. 548.

⁶Manuscript of Mr. Justice W.P.R. Street, Royal Canadian Institute, Toronto, 1885.

⁷W.L. Morton, "The Canadian Metis", The Beaver, Sept. 1950, p. 3.

⁸Ibid, p. 7.

⁹M. Giraud, "The Western Metis After the Insurrection", Vol. 9, Winter 1956, Saskatchewan History, pp. 1-15, at p. 8.

¹⁰M. Giraud, supra, n. 1, at p. 545.

¹¹Jean Legasse, "The Metis in Manitoba", 1954.

¹²D.F. Symington, "Metis Rehabilitation", Canadian Geography Journal, April 1953, pp. 128-139, at p. 134.

¹³Ibid, p. 139.

¹⁴A.G. Morice, La Race Metisse: Etude Critique, Winnipeg, Chez l'Auteur, 1938, p. 16.

¹⁵Sr. Pauline Mercier, f.m.m., Renseignements sur Saint-Laurent, Manitoba. White Horse Plain School Division, Elie, Manitoba, 1974, at p. 10.

¹⁶T. Flanagan, Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered, 1983, at p. 77.

¹⁷M. Giraud, supra, n. 1 at p. 548.

¹⁸D.F. Symington, supra, n. 12, at pp. 136-137.

¹⁹Ibid, p. 137.

²⁰Ibid, p. 138.

²¹Ibid, pp. 137-138

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- ²²Ibid, p. 138.
- ²³P.A.C. Sir John A. Macdonald Papers, M62H, Vol. 295, p. 134960.
- ²⁴loc. cit.
- ²⁵M. Giraud, supra, n. 9, at p. 12.
- ²⁶D.F. Symington, supra, n. 12, at p. 130.
- ²⁷loc. cit.
- ²⁸See M. Giraud, supra, n. 1 and letter of D.H. Macdonald to Sir John A. Macdonald, PAC Sir John A. Macdonald Papers, M62H, Vol. 295, p. 151360.
- ²⁹M. Giraud, supra, n. 9, at p. 14.
- ³⁰Public Archives of Alberta, Fr. Lacombe, OMI, "A Philanthropic Plan to Redeem The Half-Breeds of Manitoba and The North-West Territories", Annex B to P.C. 3723, 28 Dec., 1895.
- ³¹T. Flanagan, supra, n. 16, Preface, p. viii.
- ³²Archer Martin, The Hudson's Bay Company's Land Tenures, London, William Clowes and Sons, Ltd., 1898, p. 94.
- ³³Ibid, p. 100.
- ³⁴T. Flanagan, supra, n. 16, at p. 59.
- ³⁵T. Flanagan, "The Case Against Metis Aboriginal Rights", Canadian Public Policy, (1983), IX:3:314-325.
- ³⁶M. Giraud, supra, n. 1, at p. 548.
- ³⁷Le Veritable Riel, Imprimerie Generale, Montreal, 1887.
- ³⁸W.L. Morton, supra, n. 7, p. 7.
- ³⁹Eric Wells, Winnipeg Free Press, March 10, 1984, an article reviewing T. Flanagan's Riel and the Rebellion: 1885 Reconsidered.
- ⁴⁰Mark Abley, Maclean's, Nov. 21, 1983, pp. 63-64, "A rebel's disputed hanging".
- ⁴¹M. Giraud, supra, n. 1, at p. 544.
- ⁴²I am indebted to Harry Daniels for this extraordinary expression.