Our People: The Métis and French Canadians

The Métis are a mixed people. The two groups that had the most recognizable impact upon the Métis were the Algonquians (Cree and Saulteaux) and the French Canadians. From these disparate groups, the Métis borrowed and adapted culture, language, religion/spiritualism, clothing and economies. The Métis and the French Canadians have a parallel and intertwining history and often have the same family names. However, the Métis and the French Canadians have an ambivalent relationship.

Throughout the fur trade period, the Métis and the French Canadians constituted the same community, albeit with two distinct populations. French-Canadian voyageurs lived in Métis communities and married Aboriginal women à la façon du pays (according to the custom of the country). The French-Canadian voyageurs passed on a vibrant folk culture with a love of storytelling, recounting legends, singing and dancing on to the Métis. They also provided the Métis with the sash, the river lot farm system, Catholicism and a distrust of the English and English Canadians. In the Canadian West, French-Canadian voyageurs worked under the leadership of Cuthbert Grant during the Battle of Seven Oaks (June 16, 1816) and Jean-Louis Riel during the 1849 Guillaume Sayer free trade trial in 1849.

In fact, the French-Métis and French-Canadian voyageurs were so similar that English and American chroniclers could not distinguish between them. To contemporary Anglo-Saxons, they were usually called “Canadians,” “Indian French” or “Canada French.” However, among themselves the Métis and French Canadians could distinguish between one another. For the French Canadians, the Métis were “Bois-Brûlés” or “burnt-wood men” because of the darker hue of their skin and the Métis called the French Canadians “Canayens,” a derivative of Canadien. The historical record has led some to assume that the voyageurs were Métis or exclusively French-Canadian. In fact, most voyageurs prior to 1821 were French Canadian and after that date and with the amalgamation of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Northwest Company, the Métis became the largest group of fur trade workers. In contemporary times, this idea of who the voyageurs were has caused tensions between French Canadians and Métis. For instance, the Métis often wonder how Franco-Manitobans, descendants of farmers and merchants who came out west in the late nineteenth century, could sponsor the “Festival du Voyageur” every February. Some Francophones may find it odd that there are Métis voyageur games. In fact, the voyageurs were “Habitants,” who went to work in the fur trade to supplement their meager incomes as peasant farmers. Thus both Métis and local French Canadians can claim the heritage of voyageurs.

The second group of French Canadians to interact with the Métis were priests. As early as the late 1810s, French-Canadian priests began conducting missionary work among the Métis and First Nations of Rupert’s Land. In fact, the Métis were eager proselytizers for Catholicism, working
with the missionaries to bring the faith to the Cree, Dene and Saulteaux. French-Canadian missionaries such as Pères Georges-Antoine Belcourt and Lestanc were often well-loved among the Métis because they treated the Métis with admiration and respect, often administering the gospel and taking sacraments while on the bison hunt. Others such as Bishops Provencher or Taché were overtly paternalistic since they wanted the Métis to integrate into the newly emerging Euro-Canadian society at Red River. Paternalism was an aspect of French-Canadian Catholicism that the Métis did not welcome. For instance, in 1896, Père Albert Lacombe started a Métis colony in north-west Alberta, known as St. Paul des Métis, which was meant to instruct landless Métis on how to become self-sufficient farmers. An inflexible paternalism led to the colony’s demise in 1907, with the coup de grace coming in 1905 when mistreated Métis children burned down the day school. The Métis saw their dream shattered and their land, which they had cleared and toiled on for a decade, was given to French-Canadian farmers. Finally, a wound that deeply hurt the Métis occurred in 1885 when the French and French-Canadian priests at Batoche, particularly Père André, assisted the government in putting down the resistance.

It is also commonly assumed that the Métis and French Canadians had a great deal of solidarity during the 1869-70 and 1885 Resistances. In fact, real divisions were evident between the two groups at this time despite Louis Riel’s claim that his “Métis-Canadiens” or French-Canadian-Métis had a great deal of cultural, linguistic and religious solidarity with French Canadians. Québec’s response from the Red River Resistance was muted, although local French-Canadians supported the resistance. After the Métis lost their political power in Manitoba, French Canadians began taking over the judicial, political and economic infrastructure built up by the Métis. Some French-Canadian scrip speculators made small fortunes in Manitoba. In 1885, French Canadians in the Batoche area such as shopkeepers Philippe Garnot and Philippe Chamberlain were “enlisted” by the Métis; Garnot actually became one of Riel’s secretaries. Other local French-Canadians such as Willow Bunch’s Jean-Louis Légaré opposed the resistance and compelled local Métis to stay neutral. In Québec, French Canadians reacted as if the assault on the Métis and the execution of Louis Riel was an attack on themselves and not upon an Aboriginal people living in Western Canada. Moreover, contemporary French Canadians’ reaction to the 1885 Resistance and the execution of Riel was a mixture of legitimate sympathy and paternalism. In the eyes of the French-Canadian elite, an apostate (heretic) and mad Riel led an uneducated body of people into rebellion, which was precipitated by the federal government’s (read English Canada) callous treatment of the Métis’ legitimate claims. With Riel’s execution on November 16, 1885, the response from French Canada was nonetheless visceral. Tens of thousands of French Canadians, led by Wilfrid Laurier and Honoré Mercier, descended upon Montréal’s Champs de Mars and protested Riel’s execution and provided a searing indictment of the Macdonald government’s lack luster Métis policy.
Following 1885, French-Canadian, French and Walloon (French Belgian) immigrants came to the Prairie West, and settled in such Métis communities as Batoche, St. Louis, Willow Bunch, Val Marie in Saskatchewan, St. Paul des Métis and St. Albert, Alberta and in the former French Métis parishes in Manitoba. Intermarriage was common because of linguistic and religious similarities. In addition, having a sufficiently large body of Francophones present also allowed some Métis to escape racism and the stigma of being “Half-Breed rebels” by stating that they were “French.” This angered some French Canadians.

French Canadians were not overly sensitive to the Métis’ plight in the Pioneer Period (1896-1921). There are historical reasons for this. For instance, in the tit-for-tat between English and French Canada, much has been made about Samuel de Champlain’s cliched dictum that “Our children will marry and become one people.” In fact, historians, genealogists and geneticists all concur that French Canadians have a significant amount of First Nations ancestry. English Canadians used this and other documented and circumstantial historical evidence to argue that the French Canadians were a “bastardized” branch of the French “race.” French Canadians recoiled at such tribalism by being equally racist towards Indians and the Métis both in historical writing and in society. For instance, Canon Lionel Groulx, a xenophobic priest and the first professional historian of French Canada, consistently reiterated that French Canadians did not have any Indian ancestry. This is the cultural legacy which French-Canadian farmers brought out West when they encountered their Métis cousins. Many French-Canadian settlers, imbued with such racist thinking, often derisively called the Métis “les michifs.” In places such as Willow Bunch, Saskatchewan, the Métis were even dispossessed and disenfranchised by French Canadians.

The relationship between the Métis and the French Canadians was not always hostile. According to Métis Elders James Lavalley and Clementine Longworth, the French Canadians and Métis got on amicably near the Métis settlement at Crooked Lake, Saskatchewan. Mr. Lavalley said that the French Canadians enjoyed Métis stories:

Grandpa (Xavier Lavallée) used to talk French. But ah, the French people used to come down there and give him tobacco, and he knew what tobacco was. He knew that he had to tell them stories. They’d sit around.

Similarly, Louis Schmidt, Louis Riel’s former secretary, is fondly remembered by the Fransaskois for fighting for Francophone rights in Saskatchewan in the early 20th century. During the early half of the 20th century, the two groups had similar positions on national political issues. For instance, like French Canadians and Treaty Indians, French Métis also opposed the threatened imposition of conscription in the 1917 federal election and during the 1942 federal plebiscite. They also voted Liberal and shunned the Conservatives, when they were allowed to vote, like French Canadians. Like French Canadians they supported cooperatives and credit unions. However, by
World War II, both Métis and French Canadians in Western Canada began to raise their children in English-speaking environments. Any commonality that existed between the two groups disappeared as assimilated French Canadians integrated into the larger English speaking environment, while the Métis continued to encounter racism and poverty. This divide still largely continues as both groups seek to define their place in Prairie and Canadian society.

**Sources:**


