

## BOOK REVIEWS AND REVIEW ESSAYS

Donald Purich: **The Metis.** Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, Canadian Issues Series, 1988.

In the past decade the amount of published information on a poorly understood segment of the Canadian aboriginal population, the Metis, has increased dramatically. Few Canadians know more about Metis heritage than the legends of Louis Riel and the 1885 "rebellion," and few realize how vast and varied is the Metis population. Donald Purich's new volume offers easy access to some of this information. It is not a part of the increasing flow of new research on Metis communities, but it does offer an excellent summary of much of this information in a highly readable format. Purich has written a book for a non-academic audience which opens the history and community of the Metis to the general public, including Metis people themselves.

The Metis is organized chronologically, beginning with "The Birth of the Metis Nation" and ending with "The Future." This attention to chronology is vital since one cannot understand the Metis without a vision of how their present and future claims have evolved from historic stakes in aboriginal life and in the founding of Canada in the fur trade. We will return to the treatment of history below, as it does not quite fulfill its promise. The greatest strengths of Purich's contribution lie in two areas: his attention to the post-1885 period of Metis life and his ability to interpret legal information and definitions to the lay person.

Much more attention has been paid in academic and popular treatments of the Metis to their history before and surrounding the events of 1885 than to the period after. As with the schoolbook treatment of all of Canada's aboriginal peoples, consideration of the Metis as a viable population often disappears in the modern era. Children come to view the Metis as "rebels" who unsuccessfully fought the government in 1885 to keep their land and way of life as buffalo hunters, but they are never taught that the Metis have outlasted the buffalo and the militia. The



vitality of Metis music, dance, and poetry is of course rooted in the buffalo days, but it serves to unite and identify Metis people today regardless of specific origins. We hear about Metis land claims and self-government in the news without understanding where the claims come from or why they are important today. What would it mean to the Metis to have a homeland? Why is there internal disagreement within Metis organizations over representation and identity? An understanding of this depends not only on a comprehension of history but upon a portrait of living Metis communities as economic and political as well as cultural units. Half of The Metis covers the dispersion and land problems of the Metis after 1885, the development of Metis colonies in Alberta, the growth of Metis political and cultural organizations, the fight for Constitutional recognition and for land, and the importance of self-government.

Purich's other strength derives from his legal background, in combination with an ability to translate legal matters into common-sense interpretations. There are at least two complex and controversial aspects of Metis history which are and will be integral to their identity as a people: the issuance of scrip in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the legal recognition of the Metis as aboriginal people with aboriginal rights. Purich tackles both of these issues by offering a straightforward accounting of the law as process. He helps the reader to understand not only what scrip and scrip fraud were, but how they worked. One can appreciate how scrip was obtained and what it meant in terms of land and livelihood for the people, and one can understand the Metis despair as speculators took the land by desperation and fraud. Purich does this not only by "translating" legal statutes into lay language, but also offering rich examples. The same is true of his explanation of legal rights. He presents the various arguments for and against Metis rights as aboriginal rights; although clearly Purich supports the Metis in their quests, he also invites the reader to analyze the issues independently since many are still as yet legally and politically unresolved.



Purich runs into more problems in his treatment of early Metis history. Any understanding of Metis identity must be planted in this history, although there are as many open questions about the precise origins of the Metis as there are about their current legal status. At the outset of the first chapter Purich delves into the question of "Who are the Metis?" which is surely the most fundamental and comprehensive question facing Metis people today. He notes that the term is used both to refer to all people of mixed Indian/European ancestry and to those particularly derived from the settlers at Red River in the early 1800s. Not only do historians wrestle with the problem of whether Metis identity is best used in its more general or restricted sense, but so do Metis political organizations. The Metis National Council, for instance, emphasizes Red River Metis ancestry whereas the Native Council of Canada has a broader definition which includes non-status Indians.

But when Purich begins his historic treatment, he no longer makes the distinctions consistently. Most of his book focusses upon the Metis of the Plains and/or Red River proper, rather than on the northern Metis, but he fails to point out the many origins of Red River settlers as well as northern and Plains Metis and to make the distinctions count not only historically but in contemporary terms. Although he notes that the Metis have both Scottish and French origins, he does not reveal the systematic differences in the pattern of the two European cultures and economies and their impact on Metis descendants. Purich's history is occasionally disjointed and out-of-sequence; while this does not always detract from its readability, it is important to note that since early Metis history is still poorly understood at best it is risky to be too lax with chronology. But, more importantly, the author's account of the fur trade and the Red River settlement takes insufficient account of two important factors: the importance of economic roles, such as those of mediators and interpreters, in the development of Metis communities (including European needs for Metis labour), and Indian perspectives on intermarriage and its consequences. As for the former, Purich



needs to make more effective use of the research of scholars such as John Foster (1985, 1986), Jacqueline Peterson (1978, 1985), Jennifer S.H. Brown (1980), and Ron Bourgeault (1983) who examine the European need for people who would mediate between themselves and the Indians, had Indian bush and language skills but also had the cultural values and, in some cases literacy, of their European fathers. In addition, the growing demand (throughout the fur trade) for cheap local labour to replace uncertain importations was a factor.

As for the latter point, the Indian point of view, there is admittedly little information available, and Purich does recognize the need to consider the Metis as aboriginal peoples as well as products of the fur trade. Yet the reader is left with an inadequate view of Indian concerns and culture, however poorly understood these are still in the published literature. We know that the Indians saw some advantages in intermarriage, too, in boosting trade ties, and certainly they contributed substantially to Metis culture. Purich is neither an historian nor a Native person, and makes no claim to either, but he could make better use of history and oral traditions regarding Indian involvement. There are more reliable sources on Indians in the fur trade than Peter C. Newman, whom Purich quotes in his first chapter.

The second chapter begins with an account of the founding throughout the plains of Metis settlements, based on the buffalo hunt, with the greatest concentration at Red River. Here Purich jumps ahead to describe this aspect of Metis culture and economy before describing the founding of Red River itself, and without identifying the origins of those who settled on the plains: the freemen (French, Metis, and Indian) and their Native families who settled in small communities even before 1800; the offspring of North West Company Scottish and French employees in the west; the French Metis from the Great Lakes Metis communities, products of the early French fur trade; the Scottish/Indian peoples who grew up around the more northerly HBC posts and who moved down onto the plains with founding of the Red River settlement as an HBC agricultural colony in 1811-12. All of these groups



contributed to the mixed population at Red River, supplemented by Europeans, Scottish, English and French. There were similarities, as the various Metis groups often joined in the hunt, but there were differences as well; political and religious differences between the Scottish and French Metis, the two major divisions of the mixed ancestry population, were to play a role in the negotiations of power in 1869-70.

The historic accounting becomes more comprehensive with the discussion of this period. Rather than describing specific events, Purich emphasizes the larger issues of controversy at the time; this generally works well, although there are inaccuracies and some confusion posed by the tendency of the author to ignore critical chronology. Here the sequence of events is crucial insofar as the position of the Metis evolved in response to acts inside and outside Red River: the execution of Thomas Scott, for example, took place after the creation of the provisional government and a second series of arrests, rather than after the manifestations of the first provisional government as implied by the author; Smith's negotiations took place before the execution and before the second list of rights was drawn up as well. The explanation of the Metis perspectives in 1869 successfully conveys the legal arguments made by the Metis as self-governing people, but is less successful in portraying the commitments and dissensions within the Metis community. Why did the Metis reject American overtures? What was their relationship to the HBC government in power? Why did Riel's group change its view from an initial outright rejection of confederation with Canada to a series of demands for just that? And why did the English speaking "halfbreeds" show such ambivalence in relation to the cause? Purich shows us that Riel saw self-government as an inherent right of the people and as a bargaining tool for guaranteeing a future homeland, but he does not tell us about the internal debates on just what kind of a future the people wanted.

Again, Purich's treatment of the 1870 and after land/scrip issue is well done, particularly in his integration of nineteenth century with today's twentieth century struggles. Similarly, his



treatment of 1885 is sufficient, although he underemphasizes the importance of agriculture and wage labour in the western Metis economy as migrants left Red River for the North West, the complexity of Metis relations with the Indians, and the centrality for the Metis of the experiment in self-government at St. Laurent. Again, the legal aspects of 1885 and its aftermath are paramount but well-treated.

There are a few inaccuracies in the historical treatment, although none seriously impedes the message of the text. It is difficult to fully evaluate research accuracy since sources of information are not documented. The Canadian Issues Series is meant to appeal to the general public, not to the scholar, and citations are not included. This is of course not the fault of the author, but the book would have much added value as a classroom text at all levels should some of the sources of data be revealed.

In general, The Metis can be recommended for its comprehensiveness and its comprehensibility. The examples are well chosen, and most of the text is written in a very accessible style. While Purich has problems with history, he overcomes one of the greatest problems of some historians in his ability to immediately link the past with the present and future. What the book lacks is what, unfortunately, few treatments of the Metis have been able to provide--a better understanding of Metis cultural perspectives which underlie their identity. The reader will probably have little difficulty in grasping the fundamentals of the historic and legal struggles of the Metis, but will come no closer to knowing who the Metis are in terms of their aboriginality and their uniqueness. This is partly the result of Purich's failure to differentiate and treat the multiple origins of the mixed ancestry people of Canada, which could be remedied in part using existing resources, and it is also a consequence of the lack of attention to the Indian, rather than the European, component of Metis life. But it goes beyond this to be a telling indicator of the gaps in our understanding of the Metis--gaps which perhaps can only be fully filled by the people themselves.



Who are the Metis people, what are their unique values and perspectives, and how are these best perpetuated for the future?

Peggy Brizinski

## REFERENCES

- Bourgeault, Ron G.  
 1983 "The Indians, the Metis and the Fur Trade: Class, Sexism and Racism in the Transition from 'Communism' to Capitalism," Studies in Political Economy No. 12, pp. 45-80.
- Brown, Jennifer S.H.  
 1980 Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Foster, J.E.  
 1985 Some Questions and Perspectives on the Problem of Metis Roots. In J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown, eds. The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, pp. 73-91
- 1986 The Plains Metis. In R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson, eds. Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart. pp. 375-404.
- Peterson, Jacqueline  
 1978 Prelude to Red River: A Social Portrait of the Great Lakes Metis, Ethnohistory 25 (1), pp. 41-67.
- 1985 Many Roads to Red River: Metis Genesis in the Great Lakes Region, 1680-1815. In J. Peterson and J.S.H. Brown, eds. The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Metis in North America. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, pp. 37-71.
- Wayne Suttles: Coast Salish Essays. Vancouver: Talon Books, 1987.

This selection of essays presents some of the most significant contributions to the ethnology of the North West Coast. Their significance is three-fold, in terms of topic, style, and content.

First, the collection represents one of only a handful of accessible publications on a wide range of cultural attributes of