

*Histoire de Saint-Boniface, Tome I, À l'ombre des cathédrales: des origines de la colonie jusqu'en 1870*, by Luc Dauphinais. Saint-Boniface, MB: Les Éditions du Blé, 1991. Pp. 335.

This is a book that falls between two stools. It is above all a local history, yet it has implications for historiography in various areas, notably the history of the Canadian West, patterns of settlement in Manitoba and particularly the Winnipeg area, the role of the clergy in the development of the Red River colony, and, above all, the emergence and marginalization of the Métis nation.

In many ways it is a frustrating book to read, since the authors (L. Dauphinais was the main author, but two others contributed) steadfastly refuse to place their historical data in any theoretical or broader regional context. For the reader wishing to learn more about St. Boniface beyond its prehistory, the second volume will have to be awaited, since this first volume often just rehashes well-known secondary sources such as Morton, Stanley, Creighton, and Friesen. At the same time, the lack of a theoretical framework makes it difficult to relate the new data which emerge, mainly from clerical sources, to our broader knowledge of western development and colonization.

Yet, there is much new information here. Nowhere is the story of the struggles of the first francophone settlers in the Red River valley better told. From Joseph-Norbert Provencher's arrival in 1818 to his death in 1853, and through the 1850s and 1860s, the colony developed slowly and fitfully, suffering constant setbacks: crop failures, devastating floods (in 1826, 1852, and 1861), epidemics, and fires. Through it all, the two iron-willed bishops, Provencher and his successor, slowly constructed an outpost of "civilization," including all of the main institutions that still survive and define old St. Boniface today: a cathedral and bishop's residence, a convent, a hospital, a college, and primary schools. The sheer courage, sometimes bordering on heroism, demonstrated by the two men over the four decades which constitute the core of the book, makes for interesting and occasionally riveting reading.

Yet the book's main interest, in my view, is the subtext. Virtually everything we learn about St. Boniface is seen through clerical eyes, since the main archival sources of the authors are ecclesiastical. Hence, two themes emerge.

First, the proselytizing mission of the bishops is always in the forefront. Natives, more particularly the Métis, exist only to be converted and "civilized." Provencher's lifetime work was an attempt to break the traditional nomadic ways of the Métis, the better to instill proper church-going habits in them. When, in the mid-1840s, the buffalo were becoming scarcer, one of Provencher's priests writes:

Cette chasse, une fois cessée, serait-ce une perte pour l'établissement de la Rivière-Rouge? Je ne le crois nullement. A la vérité les colons auraient à en souffrir pendant quelques années; mais se trouvant par là dans la nécessité de

s'adonner à la culture, il en résulterait certainement un grand bien pour la colonie, surtout sous le rapport religieux. Cette vie nomade qu'ils mènent ainsi tous les étés n'est pas une fameuse école pour les mœurs de la jeunesse qu'il est d'ailleurs bien difficile d'instruire en hiver. (p. 150)

This quote, and other data scattered through the book, illustrate well the bishops' perspective regarding the Métis — their nomadic ways were bad habits that had to be broken, in their own interests and above all, in the interests of the church. There is apparently no attempt (at least based on the extensive material quoted from the ecclesiastical archives) on the part of clergy to understand Métis values from within and thus to define the Métis interests in their own terms.

On the other hand, the story of the early development of St. Boniface is also the story of the marginalization of the Métis in their own land. Contrary to popular belief, the bishops were indeed successful in instilling the values of "civilization" (ie., an interest in agriculture) among many Métis. This contributed over time to creating a class structure within the French-speaking part of the settlement: at the top were the bishop with his own extensive land holdings; the "Canadiens," francophones who had emigrated from Quebec and settled permanently in Red River (usually marrying Métis women); sedentary Métis, who had eventually accepted the priests' admonitions and turned to agriculture as their main livelihood; and the nomadic Métis, the majority, who could not even be counted properly at census time, much less influence day-to-day decisions in the settlement. The authors describe this process of "socioeconomic differentiation" in the 1860s as follows:

[B]ien que l'occupation principale d'un grand nombre de familles métisses de la Rivière Rouge demeure la chasse, plusieurs autres ont définitivement abandonné cette occupation traditionnelle pour se convertir à l'agriculture et à l'élevage. Certaines ne tarderont pas à figurer parmi les familles les plus prospères de Saint-Boniface, où elles contrôlent une grande partie des richesses produites. (p. 250)

As between the "Canadiens" and the sedentary Métis, a spirit of equality appears to have prevailed. This is evidenced by the fact that, in Bishop Provencher's list of nominees to the first democratic council of Assiniboia in 1849, half of the lay members proposed, after a public consultation, were Métis. (p. 262)

The book's second major claim to a mainstream western researcher's attention is the additional documentation it provides in support of the thesis that relative peace and good relations existed in Red River throughout the nineteenth century until the arrival of the Ontario immigrants in the 1860s. At several points, the active support for Provencher's settlement provided by Selkirk and Governor George Simpson is documented. In 1840, the merchant Andrew McDermot assisted Provencher in realizing one of his cherished dreams, the delivery of three massive bells (with a total weight of over 726 kg) for his first cathedral. (p. 125) Following the destruction by fire of the cathedral and the bishop's residence on 14 December 1860, "la

charité publique et la générosité de William MacTavish, gouverneur de la colonie, et de plusieurs autres riches habitants leur viennent aussitôt en aide." (p. 223)

The respect shown towards the French settlement by the Anglophone settlers appears to have been genuine, as evidenced by the reaction to Provencher's death in 1853, described by Taché himself as follows:

Ce digne prélat était trop cher à son peuple pour n'être pas pleuré amèrement. Les protestants, en grand nombre dans ce pays, se sont joints à nous dans l'accomplissement de ce pénible devoir. (p. 192)

Finally, a third broad theme emerges, which, along with the others, probably warrants further research. This is the church's natural tendency, often observed elsewhere, notably in Quebec, to ally itself with the powers that be in order to prosper in its proselytizing mission. The trade-off is clear — the church offers support for law and order in return for having a free hand in developing its missionary activities. In this case, the result in terms of economic development was the consolidation of the Hudson Bay Company's monopoly in the West through most of the nineteenth century, with its manifold socioeconomic ramifications. The link is documented at several points. In his instructions to the first missionaries sent to Red River in 1818, Mgr. Plessis set out a ten-point code of conduct. The tenth point reads as follows:

Ils maintiendront un parfait équilibre entre les prétentions réciproques des deux compagnies du Nord-Ouest et de la Baie d'Hudson, se souvenant qu'ils sont exclusivement envoyés pour le bien spirituel des peuples de la civilisation desquels doit résulter l'avantage de l'une et l'autre compagnies. (p. 59; emphasis is the reviewer's)

This book's small but real contribution to the historiography of western Canada will have to be complemented in coming years with a more definitive social history of the Métis people, since the period covered by "A l'ombres des cathédrales" is also the period when Métis culture and influence was at its height. Paradoxically, explanations for its subsequent decline can be found both in the bishops' lack of understanding of that culture and in the refusal of the Métis to admit the wisdom of the bishop's admonishments. After a reading of this book, one is left with a nagging question — whatever injustices were perpetrated upon the Métis people (and these have been well documented by D.N. Sprague and others), would history have been different if more of the Métis had developed sedentary ways? On the evidence presented in the book, it seems clear that had this occurred, many more Métis might have found a permanent home in St. Boniface and flourished socially and culturally. Perhaps the Métis nation itself could then have developed a cohesion and sense of purpose which would have allowed it to survive the technological upheavals of the twentieth century.

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